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ONE FOOT SHOT OUT, STRIKING THE BULLY UNDER THE CHIN, SENDING HIM HEADLONG

OR,

Curly Rebb's Confession

A STORY OF

Gay Old Times at Frisky Flat.

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CHAPTER I.

A BUSINESS-LIKE HOLD-UP.

It was a long, steady pull up to the head of the "Devil's Dump," and being a merciful man after his own light, Tommy

Triplock made a point of favoring his double-span of long-ears while covering that particular portion of his run from Sincerity to Frisky Flat.

No exception was made to his general rule on this especial occasion, and, with his destination almost in view, the knight of silk and ribbons had never a thought of coming trouble.

Why should he?

Times almost beyond counting Tommy Triplock had tooled his "hearse" successfully over that bit of "nasty" road without even the semblance of an accident.

The palmy days of footpads and road-agents had long gone by, and as for a hold-up, nothing was further from his mind. And yet, as the unexpected often happens, just so it did this fine afternoon in balmy June.

The stage still lacked a few rods of reaching the crest of Devil's Dump, where, it was the custom to halt for the purpose of applying a rough-lock to each rear wheel, when, without warning or preliminary, the storm burst.

From the bush-lined roadway a few feet ahead of the advancing team, spiteful reports rung forth, and, as though smitten with lightning, the head span of mules dropped in their tracks, throwing all else into utter confusion.

Tommy Triplock gave a wild howl of mixed anger and terror, but instinctively clung to the ribbons, while one foot kicked over the brake-bar, doing his little best to hold his frightened wheelers under subjection.

But, an instant later, a masked figure sprung from cover into the road-way, revolver in hand and brandishing as he called forth in harsh, menacing tones:

"Hands up, the pile o' ye! We've got you covered until—"

"Don't shoot!" yelled Triplock, striving to cover his head and other vital parts with arm and elbow, as he still clung to the reins. "That's a lady inside which—don't shoot, boss!"

"Shut that hole or I'll plug it with a bullet!" warned the road-agent, at the same moment shifting aim to send a bit of lead humming viciously past a shrinking ear.

Triplock almost dropped from his perch, cowering low with wildly protuberant eyes, as he saw other armed and masked men come into view as the ambushcade was fairly sprung.

From the interior of the stage came cries and other sounds which might be termed curses, although words themselves were not so easy to pick out from the jumble.

Evidently he who was running this bit of highway business caught sufficient to warn him of possible trouble, for again his stern tones rung forth, preliminary to the renewed barking of his heavy revolver.

"Hands up in there, and keep 'em empty unless—show 'em a sample of your metal, lads!"

Crack! went his revolver, and rattle followed from others, bullets tearing through the stage from both sides and the front, heedless of the frightened howls given forth by Tommy Triplock as that worthy kept his short legs in active motion, trying to dodge the flying lead.

Each of those bullets struck high, zip-zipping through the woodwork near the arched roof, but coming close enough to the inside passengers to justify their ducking head, if not seeking refuge under the seats as well.

Tommy Triplock was not "ringing in a bluff" on these gentlemen of the road, for there was a lady passenger, and one who seemed too badly frightened at first to even scream out in feminine dismay; but now, as the shots fairly filled the air, and began splintering the dry woodwork so close to their heads, Eula Piercy found breath for a quavering cry, even as strong hands grasped her and shoved her by main force down upon the floor of the still rocking coach.

"I'll shield you with my life, dar-

ling!" cried young Kent Kerlin, who was acrouch with the rest, but in whose right hand showed a revolver, which he was seemingly anxious to use to the best purpose.

"Down!—close down, Eula!" cried her father, Nathan, heedless of his own peril for the moment, in solicitude for this, his sole surviving child, his only living blood relative.

And then he cried out at the top of his still stentorian tones:

"Look out, you devils! If harm comes to my child—"

One of those recklessly-sent bullets struck nail or bolt, which turned its course, the battered lead little more than grazing the cheek of the old man in passing, fetching blood and drawing a fierce cry from his lips.

This only added to the natural confusion, and now the other passengers, two in number, added their lusty shouts to the mixed uproar.

"Let up, blame ye!"

"Quit shootin', fer it's bloody murder, no less!"

"Steady, lads!" cried the man in mask, who was engineering affairs on the outside. "Keep 'em lined, but be light on trigger until—simmer down inside there, unless you want us to turn it into a veritable hearse, with a ready-made load for the boneyard!"

"Give us half a show!" cried Kent Kerlin, from within. "Let the lady out of range, or—give us a show, curse ye all!"

"I'll give you a high lot on the hillside if you show even the shadow of a kick. We'll do you no bodily harm if you play white, but if you cut up rusty—ready, lads! Close in and do your duty!"

Each word was so distinctly uttered that no room was left for doubting what the next move was to be, and, seemingly satisfied that the hints already given were amply sufficient to ensure meek submission, the road-agents pressed nearer to the stage, as though eager to reap the reward due their enterprise.

While all this was going on, Tommy Triplock had jammed the brake as far over as possible, and then, the better to control his wheelers, frightened by the shooting and still further alarmed by the scent of hot blood as it flowed from their butchered mates, he slipped down to grasp the bits, though so badly scared himself that he could scarcely find words with which to soothe his long-eared helpers.

As his object was evident, no objections came from the road-agents, a number of whom were now drawing closer about the halted stage, in obedience to the commands of their leader.

One of that number, a tall, uncouth-looking knave, thrust a cocked revolver in at one of the lowered windows just ahead of himself, harshly warning:

"Stiddy, all, fer I'll shoot like a—"

"Careful, you scoundrel!" cried Nathan Piercy, as he lurched forward to shield his crouching daughter, for, to his anxious eyes, that ugly muzzle was pointing directly at Eula, and a touch on trigger might mean her death-warrant.

He caught the pistol hand and strove desperately to turn the muzzle aside, while a savage execration burst from the startled road-agent, who possibly thought his own life was imperiled.

All in an instant the two men, one inside and the other without, were mixed up in a desperate struggle over the revolver; and then—

Just how was never known, but the hammer fell and the weapon exploded, the outlaw reeling back and throwing up both arms as he gave a choking cry and groan commingled.

He staggered for a pace or two, turned half-way around, then fell in a heap, with his face in the road-dust.

From that unnerved hand dropped the still smoking weapon—his own gun, from the muzzle of which had come his death-warrant.

For a few seconds all was wildest confusion, for even the road-agents were

thrown off their balance by this totally unlooked for tragedy, while Nathan Piercy stared aghast at the result of that fierce effort to defend his loved one.

The other passengers were likewise taken all aback, and crouched lower between the seats, as they expected other raking shots from the enraged enemy.

Instead, there came one stern shout as of command; then a rush was made by the road-agents, strong hands tearing open the door and fastening upon the half-stupefied banker, hauling him unceremoniously from the coach and holding him helpless until his doom should be pronounced.

Until now Kent Kerlin had taken thought and care solely for Eula Piercy, content to play even the part of craven if by so doing he might ensure her against peril such as now menaced.

His strong hand was pressing the frightened maiden still closer to the floor, while his other was in readiness to still more effectively defend the one whom he, in good time, hoped to make his wife.

But now, realizing that only swift action could avail, Kerlin cried out in clear tones:

"Hold your fire, all! Flag of truce until—don't harm the lady!"

While speaking, and almost before she could realize what was coming, Eula Piercy was hustled from the stage by way of the other door, one arm encircling her waist and its mate flung up in appeal, as their feet struck solid earth.

"Don't shoot! This lady is—we've surrendered, confound you!"

That was hardly time or place in which to pick and choose his words, but so his meaning was fairly caught, Kent Kerlin cared little for the rest.

Several of the road-agents started toward the young couple, but at a word from their chieftain they fell back once more.

"Steady, all! Hold fast the fellow you've got, there, while the rest are tumbling out. Come, ye cripples! Belch out of that hearse while ye can, for in just ten seconds I'll turn it into a skimmer so full of holes that—steady!"

The two remaining pilgrims vied with each other in vacating those dangerous quarters, hands flying up in obedience to those meaning words, and still more significant hints, for guns were thrown in line and fingers seemed only too anxious to be picking trigger.

Eula gave a half-choked cry as she sighted her father, lying prostrate where he had fallen, beneath that living weight, and fearing the worst on his account, he appeared so death-like.

As though reanimated by the sound of her loved voice, Nathan Piercy would have scrambled to his feet but for the renewed grip upon his limbs and body by the road-agents.

It was all too late, then, to make a successful fight against odds, and Kent Kerlin seemed swift to realize as much.

While holding the maiden with one arm, lest she make a bad matter worse, his other hand flew up, empty, and with open fingers.

"Don't shoot! We yield without—don't ask for worse, men, if only for this dear one's sake!"

"That's mighty good advice, as far as it goes," cried the master of ceremonies, turning his attention toward the rest, now that he saw his first captive was rendered impotent. "Don't tempt me too far, either of you, lads, for I'd ask no better fun than to drill daylight clean through those thick skulls!"

"What shall we do with this yer critter, cap'n?" asked one of the ruffians who had been first to pounce upon old Nathan after the fall of that luckless road-agent.

"Pull his teeth and—"

"He jest hed one gun, cap'n, an' we've tuck that."

"Then take a couple of turns around his wrists—behind his back, of course; and range him up in line with the rest. Business, now!"

Paying no further attention to the stage or its driver, well assured that the dead mules would act as a patent brake and prevent any start, the masked outlaw caused his men to "line up" their living prey in regulation fashion, himself holding a revolver in readiness to enforce obedience should any one of the little company show fight.

Nothing of that sort happened, however, for the overmatched "pilgrims" were in poor fettle for resistance.

Eula was vastly relieved when she saw her father upon his feet once more, seemingly but little the worse for wear, although a tiny rill of blood was making its way downward from that bullet-graze.

She murmured a few indistinct words as she pressed closer to his side, hardly noticing the younger man who had devoted his care and attention wholly to her welfare.

"Go easy, there!" warningly cried the head outlaw. "Every tub must stand on its own bottom, for now. And you—hey, cash-grabber!"

"Hyar I be, cap'n, head up an' bag wide open!" briskly answered one of the gang, stepping further to the front.

Hanging around his neck by a stout band of the same material was a capacious grain-sack, the mouth of which yawned suggestively as its bearer advanced.

"Join your side-pardner, deacon! And you, gentlemen, bear one thing in mind: you've already crowded the limit mighty close, and another inch will carry you over the dead-line!"

"Treat us as you like, but let the lady out of it," quickly spoke up young Kerlin, face aglow and eyes asparkle. "If you are men—"

"Cork that hole up or you may find us devils," interrupted the head footpad, with cold ferocity, as pistol-muzzle turned more directly that way. "I'm talking for this outfit, and the fool who chips in without a fair invitation can count himself lucky if he keeps his thatch on!"

"I only meant—"

"Will you hush?" and with a stride forward that muzzle fairly touched the mustached lips.

Eula gave a low, half-choked cry as she shrunk shiveringly toward her father, and Kerlin crushed back his resentment for the moment, speaking hurriedly:

"Courage, dear Miss Piercy! Even such rascals as these will hardly dare do you harm; and as for the rest of us—"

A powerful hand closed upon one shoulder, and the young man was hurled several feet away, only to be followed by that weapon, over the leveled tube of which came the harsh warning:

"Last warning, young hot-head! Simmer down, or I'll lay you out too dead for skinning! And now—business, lads!"

No room was left for doubting just what "business" was meant, for the chosen "toll-takers" got in motion, "Cash-grabber" holding the sack, while the "deacon" deftly explored such pockets as his practiced fingers could readily find.

No very large sum was found upon either Jack Houdin or Mark Visner, the two veterans who stood at one end of that line; but no words of anger or of reviling were flung that way, since little else seemed to be expected.

But, as the toll-gatherers came to Nathan Piercy, who stood next in line, the chief of road-agents plainly betrayed his anxiety by bending forward, his pistol drooping out of range as he watched what followed.

Only an ordinary wallet rewarded those dexterous fingers, and that one by no means of the fattest, and the leader gave a savage snarl as he cried aloud:

"Closer—look closer, ye fools! Go to his hide—beneath it if you must! Look closer for—he's got heap-sight more than that!"

Again the search was made, Nathan Piercy offering no resistance the while,

though his face showed unusually pale and something like an uneasy glitter might have been noticed in his keen eyes.

"Ef he's got ar'ything more then this yer, cap'n, it shorely must be under his pelt," reluctantly reported "the deacon."

At this the leader strode forward, giving pistol a menacing flourish as he came within arm's-length of the banker, speaking harshly:

"I gave you fair warning that 'twas either your money or your life! Don't force us to take both, Nathan Piercy!"

"You know me, then?"

"I know that you're trying to play roots upon us, and I know that it's got to be one thing or the other; cough up that wad of good money, you infernal fraud, or I'll lift your roof off with a blue pill!"

Left hand shot forth to close upon the banker's throat, while its mate shoved pistol-muzzle fairly into his face. And over that deadly implement glowed and glittered angry eyes back of that sable mask.

CHAPTER II.

KENT KERLIN MAKES A BREAK.

It really looked as though a second death was about to be added to the day's record, for none who saw or heard could doubt that the road-agent was in vicious earnest.

With arms bound behind his back with thongs too substantial for even a strong man to break under such disadvantage, Nathan Piercy was absolutely helpless in that savage grip.

His face was already as pale as it well could be, but his nerve was proven by those dauntless eyes, that unflinching figure.

"Shoot, you cur!" he cried, while eyes met eyes above that menacing weapon.

Again Eula gave gasping scream at sight of her parent's peril, and only for the swift grasp made by Kent Kerlin she would have sprung to shield that loved being with her own frail form.

"For love of heaven, darling, don't make a bad matter worse!" fairly exploded the young man, as he swung the maiden back and around, placing his own body as a shield for the loved one against the weapons which instinctively turned that way. "Don't shoot! She doesn't—do harm to either of these people, you devils, and I'll make you sup sorrow if it takes all my life!"

The masked chieftain drew back at that cry, but that step was hardly attributable to fear of an attack from that quarter, nor could it be through sympathy for a frightened girl.

An ugly-sounding laugh came from behind the black mask which so perfectly concealed his identity, and a quick gesture caused his fellows to hold their hands.

"Steady, lads!" he repeated, sharply. "It's all right. Or, if not all right now, we'll make it so in a holy hurry. Deacon?"

"Right hyar, cap'n."

"You are sure the old fraud hasn't anything more of value hidden away about his carcass?"

"Ef he hes I'll 'gree to eat it, boss!"

"Very well. Proceed with the contribution, please. I fancy yonder hot-head will pan out a little richer. As a chip of the old block he surely ought to, anyway!"

"Ruther 'twas the ole gent, though, cap'n!"

"Well, see what the young fellow has, first, deacon. And you, Kent Kerlin, play clean white unless you're really anxious to skip the rope clean over the divide!"

"You're welcome to what few rocks I've got," retorted Kerlin, stepping a bit in front of the maiden in whose safety he took so powerful an interest. "I'll ask you for a receipt in full, though, if ever we meet up again on more equitable terms."

"Put a curb on, young fellow. Threats don't pass current here, and if you say too much—clean him up, boys!"

That did not take long, for Kerlin made no resistance, and his valuables quickly found their way into the sack carried by the Cash-grabber: purse, diamond pin and stud, gold watch and chain.

This was by far the most valuable haul made by the highwaymen as yet, but the leader merely gave a dissatisfied grunt as he took notes.

Then he spoke out, sharply:

"If you're counting on our lack of a lady member to do the rest of the searching, Nathan Piercy, you're going to get left. Your daughter is worth her weight in diamonds, no doubt, but just now we're looking for cash. Shall we search—"

"You infernal curs!"

The road-agent chief laughed, harshly, making a gesture which seemed to be one of exultation. Then he spoke again:

"Good enough! I'll pinch where you feel it the most keenly, old rocks! So you tell us where that boodle has gone to, my angel!"

"She don't know," hastily answered Kerlin, as Eula shrunk back in terror from that rude address. "How should she know?"

"Is she your wife, young fellow?"

"No, but I'd gladly forfeit half my remaining lease of life if I had the legal right to call her—wife!"

A barely perceptible pause before the title, but the vivid glow in those dark eyes betrayed how intensely in earnest the young man was.

The road-agent gazed keenly at the young couple, for a few seconds; in silence; then he gave toss of head with gesture of hand to suit, as he turned once more toward Nathan Piercy.

"Maybe I'm a soft-livered fool for taking so much trouble on your account, old gent, but, last time of asking! Cough up that boodle, or it'll be all the worse for your daughter, yonder!"

Again Kerlin broke forth, apparently reckless on his own account. Swiftly the hot words leaped from his lips—so swiftly that one could scarcely follow his full meaning:

"I'll raise the whole country against you! I'll hunt you down to the gallows if it takes a year—if it takes my whole lifetime!"

"That span won't cover another half-hour if you don't cork up," grimly declared the outlaw; then, speaking again to the banker: "It's you I'm singing this sweet tune for, old codger, and that for the last time."

"I know you. I know just what manner of business carried you from Frisky Flat to Sincerity, and beyond. I know what you went after, and I know just as certainly that your venture was wholly successful."

"I know that you had a large amount of cash with you when you entered the hearse at Sincerity. I know that you couldn't have lost it by the way. And so, where is that boodle, Nathan Piercy?"

The banker caught breath sharply as his eyes involuntarily twitched in the direction of his daughter, then half-fainting, supported by the strong left arm of Kent Kerlin.

The road-agent was keenly alert, and chuckled grimly as he caught that brief glance, the full meaning of which was so easy to be read.

The rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs just then came to the ears of all, and instantly the gang was on the defensive, their leader sternly calling forth:

"Steady, lads! Wait for the word and then—follow my lead, whatever may come!"

But, scarcely had he spoken than the clatter ceased, a clear, mellow whistle floating on the still air a moment later.

"It's all right, boys!" cried the chief, like one relieved, then making answer after much the same fashion.

That second whistle was quickly answered by the approach of a man on horseback, masked like the others, and clearly a member of the same lawless cohort.

The head road-agent sprang forward

to meet him, their heads drawing close together for a few seconds, then the captain stepped back and the messenger dismounted, standing by the head of his horse, seemingly only an interested witness of what was to follow.

Again the leading outlaw spoke to Piercy, but his revolver covered another instead.

"I've wasted far too much time on you already, old man. Tell me what you've done with that boodle: tell me right where the package of banknotes lies this moment, or—I'll send your daughter to glory by lightning Express!"

That ugly muzzle was bearing squarely upon the frightened maiden, while two of the road-agents deftly grasped Kent Kerlin and held him absolutely helpless to shield or to defend.

The banker gave a husky cry as he recognized the peril his child was thus cast into, and then was wrought what no fear for himself could possibly have brought about.

"Don't—you demon! Don't shoot, for love of—"

"Cough it up, then, you pig-headed idiot! Knuckle down, and that before I can count ten, or I'll lay your daughter out for the sexton! I swear it, by all mankind holds holy!"

A moment's pause, then his voice was heard again, counting slowly.

Barely long enough to fully realize how utterly impotent he was in the face of such odds, while his fellow-passengers agitatedly urged him to yield rather than sacrifice his child, then Nathan Piercy weakened.

"Hold, you demon! I'll tell—I'll do anything rather than—my poor child is not—hold, I say!"

"Where is the money, old man?"

"In the stage," huskily answered the banker, now fairly shivering under that intense strain.

"Whereabouts? If you're lying to me now, old chap, I'll fix you both for planting!" warned the road-agent, still keeping the maiden covered with his cocked revolver.

"I am not lying. I hid the package when you began shooting, and I—for love of heaven! don't harm my poor child!"

"All right!" and the muzzle was turned toward father instead of covering daughter. "Now, Piercy, suppose you read your title clear by showing us just where that boodle is stowed away? You can do it, of course?"

"Yes, but—"

"It's show up or lay down, remember!" pitilessly declared the outlaw, now apparently having eyes for none other than the banker. "None can find so well as those who hide, and so—shall I lend you a spur, Mr. Piercy?"

"My child—"

"Shall come to no further harm unless you are trying to play us dirt," quickly assured the road-agent, lust for money evidently working a mighty change in his mood. "Business, though! We're on edge, right now, and unless you're all fool you'll not risk a cutting, old man!"

Old Nathan evidently longed for a more substantial assurance or guarantee that his child should be held harm free to the end, but after the vicious mood displayed by this evil-doer he feared to try for too much, lest he should lose all, now that the hiding-place of the money was made known.

Yielding to that stern gesture, then, the banker of Frisky Flat turned toward the stage, which still stood where it had been so brutally halted by powder and lead.

The road-agent chief turned with him, and scarcely one of that lawless company but what made a similar move.

Kent Kerlin felt those hands drop away from his arms, leaving him at liberty, so far as bonds were concerned, and his black eyes wore a lurid glow as they swept swiftly around.

Not one of the outlaws was watching him, just then.

The horseman who had arrived so recently, was leaning forward in eager

watching; but his gaze was riveted upon the banker and his armed guard, as Nathan Piercy slowly moved toward the stage.

Even the two veteran miners and prospectors had apparently lost thought of all else, for they, too, were looking in that direction with undisguised eagerness.

Only poor Eula and himself! Only—only those two, and—the horse!

It seemed almost suicidal to take such a reckless chance; but, evidently, Kent Kerlin deemed still worse might be in store for the woman whom he wished to make his wife, for with scarcely a moment's hesitation or delay, he took swift and decisive action.

His right arm stiffened and bent part way. His fingers closed into a hard lump as he took a silent step toward the horseman.

Then he made a swift leap forward, arm shooting out as he came, and with hardly a sound the masked rider reeled backward, to fall at full length beside the stage-trail!

Swift and sure in every motion, Kent Kerlin grasped reins and urged the horse toward Eula, then grasped the frightened maiden with his free arm, by a powerful effort swinging her clear of the ground and into the saddle, almost before she could realize what was being done.

A frightened cry broke from her lips. The horse snorted and gave a plunge as Kent Kerlin leaped upon its haunches behind the girl, just in time to save her from falling off the uneasy animal.

All this took place in the small fraction of a minute, but swiftly as he had acted, Kerlin knew that the alarm would be taken instantly, and so he jerked the animal around, speeding away from rather than toward Frisky Flat.

There was only the one course left open to him, then. The direct route to town was barred by the road-agents, whose angry yells and fierce curses were even now telling of discovery.

The captain was one of the first to see and to comprehend just what was transpiring, and with a vicious yell he wheeled, revolver in hand and barking spitefully as it flew to a level with the fugitives.

Once, twice, he fired, and that before another of the gang rallied sufficiently to take action, his voice ringing forth above the sound of his smoking gun:

"After them, a couple of you! He can't run far without—after them and take him, dead or alive, ye hounds!"

A couple of the masked men made a rush in that direction, others firing rapidly, as though in hopes to kill or to cripple.

For a moment or two Nathan Piercy seemed fairly dazed by this unexpected happening, then he sprang as though to defend his child: only to be felled senseless by the butt of a heavy revolver.

CHAPTER III.

SENTENCED TO THE DEVIL'S DUMP.

Nathan Piercy fell before that savage stroke, when, in an instant, his assailant reversed his revolver to cover the two miners, as he cried:

"Hands up, you villains! Make a move or a break and I'll send you to Hades by Express!"

Others of the gang were equally alert, and even if the men had seriously thought of chipping in on behalf of their less fortunate companion, all such ideas must have gone glimmering.

Up flew their hands, and tongues were scarcely less swift in making known their submission, yet neither Jack Houdin nor Mark Visner was what could with justice be termed cur or craven.

The odds were all against them now, and that was their excuse.

"We hain't a-doin' a blame thing, boss!"

"Nur we don't mean to, nuther, onless—"

"Button up, you whelps!" snarled the outlaw, as he gazed in the direction taken by Kent Kerlin and his fair companion,

A turn in the trail had carried them out of eye-range, although a trained ear could still catch sounds of hoofstrokes, while the two masks started in chase were running swiftly along the road, hot upon the scent, although afoot.

A half-score seconds more, then the knaves made the turn, and were also lost to view for the time being.

"Never touched 'em!" muttered the road-agent chief, making a fierce gesture, as though mourning that fact. "A clean slip-up, or I'll eat my hat!"

"But the boys'll fetch 'em, boss; don't you be skeered they won't, now!" declared one of his fellows in tones meant to both comfort and reassure. "When Alf an'—"

"No names, you fool!" harshly interrupted the leader, with swift gesture and nod of cowed head toward the two pilgrims hard by.

Then, like one who only now recognizes a possible peril, he added:

"Hold these critters level, boys. Croak 'em if they give any fresh trouble before I get back. If all this racket has started the people at Frisky Flat—wait and watch 'em, I say!"

Making a gesture which called to his heels a particular one of the lawless aggregation, the captain of road-agents hurried up the remaining portion of that long incline, pausing only when fairly at the top of the Devil's Dump.

A keen glance down the narrow road-way assured him no living being was astir in that particular quarter, then the outlaw flashed looks further on, eager to make sure no harm was to be expected from that direction.

For fully a quarter of a mile that road-bed sloped, straight and true as a taut string, for the most part wide enough to permit teams to pass each other while headed in opposite directions.

All the time that smooth roadbed was drawing nearer a danger-point, where the hillside fell abruptly away to form an actual precipice, to go over which would mean certain death in awful shape.

A straight decline of almost a quarter of a mile, then the road was forced to take an acute bend around yonder rocky shoulder of the mountain, to show another long stretch of fairly even trail, though much narrower than the upper stretch, thanks to the nature of the hillside.

Here and there small niches had been blasted out of the almost solid rock, forming places where one team might be crowded to let another one pass by; but for the most part there was barely room for a single team to travel, with solid rock on the right, a sheer descent of many yards showing perilously close upon the left, as one faced toward Frisky Flat.

A partial view of that lively town could be won from the head of Devil's Dump, and now the keen eyes of the two road-agents were turned in that direction, seeking full conviction.

The distance was so great that it seemed hardly possible the alarm could have carried to the Flat; but he who led that lawless hold-up knew how wondrously far the sound of burning powder will float at times, and he cared not to risk anything more than was strictly necessary.

"It's all right, don't you reckon, boss?"

"I believe it! Still, I wasn't sure. Some idle fool might have been astir this side of the Flat, and then—well, so much the better for our little game, Jimmy!"

"Then you're gwine fer to—"

"Bide a wee, Jimmy, and maybe you'll see what you will see!"

With a parting glance toward the distant mining camp, and another look along that bent incline with its low fence of ragged boulders, the road-agent leader turned and hastened back to where the stage was still in waiting.

"All's right in that quarter, lads," was his curt announcement to all those whose curious eyes turned his way with

velled eagerness. "No kick coming, that I can see; and now—little old business!"

Nathan Piercy was still lying as he had fallen beneath that cruel stroke of pistol-butt, but as the outlaw brushed past him, the old man gave a faint groan, stirring as one will with reviving senses.

"Look to him, you fellows! I'll settle his case after I've seen how much—steady, all of you!"

As though the bare thought lent springs to his limbs, the outlaw dashed over to the stage, plunging in at one of the open doors, and beginning to rummage around like one searching for a lost treasure.

There were so few possible places of concealment that naturally a quest must be brief, and only a few seconds later his fiercely exultant cry told his eager knaves that success had rewarded his search.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed in triumph as he emerged, flourishing a neat package over his head as he sprang from the coach. "Under a cushion, where the old fraud thrust it—ostrich-like!"

"It's the solid stuff, cap'n?" eagerly demanded one of the men in mask, reaching out a hand as though to claim at least a share, then and there.

But his master waved the fellow back, speaking sharply:

"Don't burn your fingers, my pretty lad! This is—for the family, of course, but this isn't the time nor place for a divvy; can't you see that much?"

"Yes, but—how much be they thar, cap'n?"

"Enough to pay for one drunk apiece, anyway. Let that content you for the present. We have other work on hand, just now."

The precious package was thrust into his bosom, the coat being buttoned closely above it; then the chief of road-agents passed over to where the dead man lay, as yet uncared for by his fellows.

A brief examination showed that the luckless criminal was long past human aid, and, leaving that sable mask still in place, to effectually conceal his identity, the leader turned once more toward Nathan Piercy.

By this time the banker of Frisky Flat had recovered sufficiently to assume a sitting posture, although his half-vacant stare around showed that his wits were still wool-gathering, to some extent.

Drawing forth the package of money he swiftly smote both cheeks of his captive with it, laughing in fierce glee as the old gentleman gave start and low cry of recognition.

"Ah-ha! Thought you'd cheat the tax-collectors, is it, old coon?" he cried, mockingly. "Thought you'd foolish—pah! 'Tis a good haul, and while I'm sorry for the bank 'twas intended to bolster up. I can't help thinking that we're by far the most needy and deserving. So—look your last upon the ducats, Nathan Piercy!"

With devilish malice he flourished the money close in front of that blood-marked face, slapping first one cheek and then the other; but for once the charm of money failed, so far as Nathan Piercy was concerned:

He glanced dizzily around, then strove to rise, muttering:

"Eula—my child! Where is—if harm has come to her, you pitiless devils!"

The road-agent chief drew back a bit, making a swift gesture as he replaced that valuable package in his breast.

Two couple of strong hands immediately fastened upon the banker, who was jerked rudely to his feet and then held powerless to break away.

"Don't jump him too mighty tough, boss," one of the miners ventured to expostulate at this. "The pore ole critter hain't rightly—"

"You know what comes next, lads: do your duty!" harshly cried their leader, revolver coming forth.

Half a dozen of the lusty knaves pounced upon Houdin and Visner, tripping their heels from under them, then wrenching arms backward to apply stout bonds at wrists and elbows.

Another couple paid attention to Tommy Triplock, in spite of his expostulations, and in considerably less than five minutes the work was completed as set forth by the master.

"All set on this yer alley, boss!" reported one of the road-agents.

"Good enough! And now we'll settle the rest of it, fairly and squarely, taking the will of the majority to rule. Are you ready, lads?"

"Ready an' waitin', boss!"

"All right. Give me your attention, please, for upon your verdict may hang the—well, call it comfort—of these four gentlemen."

"I'd rather they was hangin' by a rope," surlily growled one of the masked knaves, as his gaze turned toward yonder silent shape as it lay in a pool of its own blood. "Killin' is murder, an' murder calls for hangin', don't it, boss?"

"It ought to, yes; but circumstances alter cases, and so—"

The speaker broke off with incomplete sentence. He moved nearer the captive banker, forefinger tapping chest, as though to lend emphasis to the words.

"You have this day killed a better lad than ever stood up in your best shoes, Nathan Piercy. You did this after receiving honest warning that no bodily harm should come your way so long as you acted reasonably white. And now—what have you to say for yourself?"

"My child is—devils, all! What have you done with my daughter?"

"Hang him like a sheep-killin' cur!"

"Set 'em all up fer a target to burn powder at!"

Merely samples of the savage cries which now broke forth; but the growing tumult was stilled by the master, hand going up to command attention and quiet.

"Peace, my lads! So far our hands have been kept free from shedding human blood, and surely 'twould be a pity to break our record, don't you think?"

"But—thar's pore pardy, yender; clean butchered, cap'n!"

A low, mocking chuckle came from behind that sable mask.

"You think I am too soft-hearted, lads? Well, better to err on the side of mercy, and so—we'll leave it for their patron saint to cast the die: to save by a miracle if their hour has not struck!"

"Then they hain't—"

"Cut loose those dead mules and fetch the stage along!" cried the road-agent, standing guard over the bound and helpless passengers while his orders were being carried out.

When the coach was free once more, a gesture led to the four men being hustled inside the vehicle, after which stout ropes were knotted to each door-handle, then brought around to the driver's seat, there to be firmly knotted.

Another command from the chief sent the stage up to the crest of Devil's Dump, where another halt was made for the purpose of taking off the wheelers, leaving the heavy tongue to stand straight out, held clear of the ground upon which the heavy breast chains now dangled.

All this was done without the slightest heed being paid to the cries and pleadings set up by the miners and the drivers, each of whom began to realize the awful peril which surely menaced their lives.

"How shall it be, men?" asked the master of ceremonies when these arrangements were duly made. "Shall we leave 'em all here, like this, to await the coming of help from either way?"

"No, no! Sarve 'em out fer—didn't they butcher pore pardy?"

"All right, gentlemen," responded the chief, smothering a low chuckle as of grim pleasure the while. "You were both judge and jury, and what you may decide surely goes. Now—listen!"

"What shall be the ending, my merry lads? Shall we let the murderer of our dear friend and honest comrade go scot-free, or—"

"No, no!"

"Or shall we leave their fate to an overruling providence?"

"Send 'em down the Dump!"

"Well, that is pretty much what I meant, lads. 'Tis said that no man can die before his time comes. If so, we're not responsible for what may happen if this hearse should chance to start downhill, are we?"

"Start 'em! Down the Dump with the bloomin' lot!"

Wild cries of horror broke from the hapless passengers as the full extent of their peril flashed across half-dazed brains.

Right well they one and all knew that such an unguided flight would mean certain destruction to the coach and a horrible death for all contained inside its doors. Yet, what could they do, bound and helpless?

With fierce peals of reckless laughter the now thoroughly fired outlaws caught hold of the stage, forcing it along until the fatal crest was fairly crossed, and the vehicle's weight alone forced it onward.

And then, amid terrified cries and vain struggles to break loose, the coach was shoved clear and its mad descent was fairly begun!

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPORT IN VELVET.

"Well, now, that begins to sound something like business, don't it?" Verne Velvet asked himself, as he straightened up a bit more in the saddle, casting a keen look ahead.

From that direction came the report of firearms in irregular order, which fact alone would prove 'twas something more than innocent target-firing, or the work of a single hunter out after harmless game for pot or pan.

The shots seemed to melt into each other, sounding indistinct, as though coming from a considerable distance; but Mr. Velvet was by no means a novice in mountain life, and he knew how perplexingly such echoes will get mixed up by rock and crag, tree and scrub.

"A hold-up, for choice!" was his next decision, one hand instinctively feeling for the weapons which—though not in bold display—he carried upon his person for use in case of an emergency.

Another shot or two came from the same quarter, and giving his comely person a bit of a shake, as though to settle himself well in saddle, Verne Velvet slackened reins and permitted his spirited steed to spring forward and settle into a low, easy pace, which devoured space with wondrous grace and rapidity.

A figure better suited for city park than mountain trail, if garb alone be taken into consideration; a figure such as one rarely meets with in the "free silver" country, where strong contrasts are so common and odd matching so plentiful.

This "sport in velvet" was something above the average in height, while his frame was admirably proportioned, giving evidence of both muscular powers and unusual activity as well.

From neck to ankles he was clad in velvet of dark hue—the color of rich port wine—fashionably cut and perfectly fitted, clearly the handiwork of no amateur knight of tapeline and needle.

His linen was of the finest, and laundered to perfection; cuffs, collar, and bosom with polish unmarred by sweat or by dust.

Upon his head rested a silk hat of latest style, below which showed his curling hair, dark brown and glossy as a newly-fallen chestnut. A trimly-kept mustache covered his upper lip and shaded without wholly concealing a red-lipped mouth, which could smile as a woman or grow stern and fixed as fate if occasion called.

Upon his small, shapely feet were patent leathers, and a small bunch of scented wild flowers showed at his buttonhole.

At first glance one would be inclined to set Verne Velvet down as a city dude gone widely astray; but that mistake was not likely to be repeated after closer acquaintance.

The good white horse paced on with smooth rapidity, carrying its dandified master nearer the scene of action, and never a shade of doubt or of apprehension did the sport betray as other sounds came to his hearing.

First, the clatter of iron-shod hoofs, plainly coming in his direction, and then, but a few seconds later, a couple of gun- or pistol shots, ringing forth spitefully upon the nearly still air.

"Steady, boy!" muttered Velvet, as he drew slightly upon the reins, bringing the perfectly trained steed to a halt with long tail fairly touching the road-dust. "Let's see what all this means, anyway!"

Outwardly as cool and composed as though at the threshold of a ballroom, the Dude in Velvet produced a revolver, lifting hammer far enough to twirl the cylinder over an open palm, thus making sure the weapon was in good working order.

All this while those keen brown eyes were fixed ahead as far as the narrow and winding stage-trail would permit; but in place of catching an early view of the persons who made those sounds, Verne Velvet found himself foiled.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, as the sounds took a sudden shift. "Struck another course, as I'm a sinner; Now, what—is it worth while, though?"

A brief-lived hesitation, then the Sport in Velvet again sent his white mount ahead, ears guiding eyes as he drew nearer the point where that divergence must have taken place.

If he had driven on at top speed, he would have met a portion of that party, face to face, with possibly disastrous results to one or both; but knowing that the clatter of his horse's hoofs would as surely give warning to the others, he merely acted with ordinary prudence.

Less than a quarter of a mile beyond where he first drew rein, the Velvet Sport caught sight of a couple of men on foot, running swiftly along, visible one moment, only to vanish the next.

There was nothing mysterious about that vanishing, however, for he instantly recognized the truth; the footmen had turned into the side-chute taken but a brief space before by the horseman whose hoofstrokes were even now to be caught by a keen ear.

A touch of heel sent the white horse onward until, at the mouth of that narrow and winding defile, but even so soon the footmen had vanished without leaving a trace behind them.

"What is it all about, anyway?" mused Verne Velvet, brows contracting as he stared up that pass, now growing more gloomy as the sun sunk lower in the west.

Was it worth his while to look deeper into the affair? And yet, why should he bother over it?

"It couldn't well be a hold-up, since these fellows were on foot, while the other—I think there was but one horse?"

For a few moments Verne Velvet sat in saddle, pondering over the, as yet, puzzle, listening in vain for further sounds from that direction. If such came, to tell of returning parties, he might still take a hand in the little game, just for amusement. But no such sounds floated his way during that brief halt.

"Good-by, gentlemen!" the Velvet Sport said, with a half-defiant nod in that gloomy direction, then turning head of horse along the regular road to Frisky Flat. "Hope you'll have oceans of fun, and not so mighty much to pay the piper when all's over!"

Lazily wondering just what it all might be about, Verne Velvet rode at a leisurely pace toward his destination, knowing that Frisky Flat could not be many more miles away, and having naught in particular to urge him on.

And thence it came to pass that the echoes of hoofstrokes failed to warn the road-agents of another's coming, busy as they all were just then.

With all his outward carelessness, Verne Velvet was a man who ever kept

his wits upon the keen alert, and so he caught an early glimpse of the held-up stage, with its accompaniment of armed and masked captors.

Just then the passengers were being bound by command of the road-agent chief, and forced as he was to approach with all caution, Verne Velvet failed to take in the full situation until it was too late to expect backing from those parties.

If he had been a little earlier on the scene, the result might have been different, for as it was he gripped pistol-butt and almost sent his good white steed forward in a reckless dash for rescue.

But then sober reason came to the front, and the sport saw how hopeless any such movement was.

"Ten to one, and each knave of them armed to the teeth!" was his cooler summary, as he sat his horse there in the edge of good cover. "If those pilgrims were—trussed up as though for killing!"

Velvet could see as much, now, and with lowered brows and tightening lips he watched while the hapless fellows were hustled inside the stage by the road-agents; but even yet he failed to divine what a horrible doom had been pronounced upon those luckless men.

And so, grimly watching and wondering how best he might in part repay yonder vagabonds of the mountain trails, the Dude in Velvet took mental notes of all while the doors were secured under the watchful eyes of that criminal leader, then the stage slowly forced up the remaining portion of the slope, to pause again at the crest of the Devil's Dump.

Not until this was accomplished and he saw the wheel mules taken away from the tongue did even an inkling of the frightful truth come to the Sport in Velvet, causing him to catch breath sharply and grind a fierce oath between his teeth.

"Down the Dump? For love of heaven—surely it cannot be?"

It was almost past belief, for only death in horrid shape could be the outcome of such a mad action; and yet, even as his lips uttered the fierce protest, Verne Velvet knew in his heart that this was precisely the doom which had been pronounced upon those hapless individuals.

Whipping forth a revolver in each hand, letting reins lay loose upon neck, knowing how surely he might count upon that noble creature, the enraged sport dashed up the slope at full speed, giving a fierce yell as he charged; but all too late to check that fiendish act.

Even as he sprung into action the fatal impulse was given to the heavy vehicle, and it began rolling down the Dump with momentarily accelerated speed.

Wholly absorbed in their devilish scheme of vengeance, not one of the road-agents suspected danger from the rear, and their first intimation came in that fierce cry, those clattering hoofs and a brace of barking revolvers.

Verne Velvet paused not to count the odds against himself, but raced on, shooting at every jump, yelling as though in command of at least a little army of equally bold and resolute men.

The lawless gang scattered in dismay, yelling, cursing, fairly tumbling over each other as they sought to clear the way; but Verne Velvet never slackened pace for an instant as he split their confused ranks, never turned look to right or to left, although the chief and a couple of his stouter-hearted knaves were beginning to shoot, wickedly.

For, as he reached that narrow, level stretch, Velvet caught sight of the stage rolling down the slope, each second adding to its rate of speed, and fetching the awful ending that much nearer the helpless men.

Then he plunged down the slope himself, while pistol-bullets began to hum and howl viciously about his person, each one threatening to down the bold fellow for good and all.

So far the coach had run true, those dangling chains fail to touch or catch

upon aught sufficient to jerk the tongue to right or to left; and seeing this, Verne Velvet likewise saw the one frail and desperate chance for saving those awfully imperiled lives: saw, and—took it, heedless of his own peril!

Putting up his revolvers as he sped on at quickened pace, Velvet bent low in the saddle as he drew up with the stage, now almost flying through the impetus lent by its own weight, crying aloud as he passed:

"I'll save you, lads, or we'll go to smash together!"

Then, with sure and powerful clutch he caught one of those trailing breast-chains, rising in his saddle and lifting the heavy tongue as he did so, speaking a soothing word to the good white steed as they sped down the Devil's Dump at breakneck speed.

While he was able to support the tongue while in saddle, it was wholly beyond human power to do more than guide the stage; to check it was impossible.

By this time the sharp bend in the trail was close at hand, and fully realizing that for a wheel to strike yonder wall of stones on the brink of the precipice meant certain death to them all, while to veer a foot too far in the other direction would mean his own crushing between stage and wall, Verne Velvet again spoke to his steed, and again displayed superhuman strength and nerve.

Flung outward by its own weight and momentum, the coach sent up an alarming grating of sliding wheels, but with a fierce tug the sport held fast to that heavy tongue, though the chain was eating into his flesh, and one foot was fairly scraping against that uneven wall of solid rock.

One moment of breathless suspense, then the thundering stage settled down on all four wheels, turning the danger-point and dashing on down the second fair stretch, with the safe level far below just coming into sight.

Wild yells and screams came from the interior, but Verne Velvet was doing all that mortal man might, and until that crazy race against grim death was fairly won, he could take thought only for his duty; to hold that heavy tongue firm and straight, to guide that insensate mass true to a line which stretched to yonder sandy level.

And so he did, although 'twould have been no easy task for him to explain just how 'twas all brought to pass, once that awful strain was over with.

Down the Devil's Dump, out upon the level, scattering the sand in showers until the weight of the coach itself caused a slackening, then a halt, with both vehicle and living load safe and sound!

Alive, but speechless with terror! With a keen-edged pocket-knife the Dude in Velvet cut those knotted ropes asunder and twisted open the nearest door without leaving the saddle as yet, speaking hurriedly as he did so:

"Lively, gentlemen! I'll free one of you, then let him do the rest while I guard—those devils in human shape may not yet be content to call it an even game!"

As it chanced, Nathan Piercy was the man first reached by the knife in hand, and as he staggered dizzily through the opened door, he huskily panted:

"My child—those devils—save my daughter, if ye be a man!"

The white steed recoiled as the banker fell forward, and this caused Verne Velvet to turn eyes in another direction, then crying out sharply:

"Steady, all! That looks like fresh trouble coming; red-hot, too!"

CHAPTER V.

A BIT OF SPOOKISH BUSINESS.

While uttering these words Verne Velvet pointed toward Frisky Flat, having just caught sight of a moving force in that direction.

With nerves sadly shaken by their recent experience the three involuntary descendants of the Devil's Dump scram-

bled as quickly as might be out of the stage, and then Tommy Triplock gave a shrill screech of pure delight, as his keen eyes turned toward that same point of the compass.

"Ge-lory to the ram! Ef they gits hyar fust an'—whar's them darned agents at, aryhow?"

"Then it isn't—who are they, pray, friend?" asked the Dude in Velvet, swift to catch a hint.

"Folks from the Flat, an' ef—cut me loose, somebody! Thar's them wheelers—an' thar's them lead mules which—oh, ef ever I git a hafe-way chaine fer to—cut me loose, somebody!"

That was no easy task, so thoroughly excited was the stump little driver, hopping about, staggering here and there, as he vainly wrestled with his bonds.

Verne Velvet was keeping watch on the Dump, in expectation of seeing some of the enemy put in an appearance from that direction, if only to ascertain just what had taken place after stage and its steersman had spun around the elbow above.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of at least one man; or fancied he did; just peering into view for an instant; but none others followed, nor could he win a sight fair enough to take oath such was indeed a living human.

Springing off the horse which had served him so nobly, the sport regained the knife which had fallen to earth after cutting Nathan Piercy free, and with it quickly completed the work so well begun.

"If they are friends, yonder, all right," he spoke, swiftly, while so at work. "If not—well, I reckon we can make it interesting for them while we last. Eh, gentlemen?"

All doubts were speedily dispelled, however, for both Triplock and Houdin recognized friends among the leaders who came so hurriedly toward the scene, and as shouts of recognition flew back and forth, the Sport in Velvet knew all was coming out aright.

A motley crowd. Men on horseback and men afoot. Men with frosted hair and beard, young lads whose cheeks could scarcely show a fuzzy hint of coming honors, yet one and all bearing arms and clearly eager to make the best possible use of them.

Explanations were in order and hastily given, some telling how a bright-eyed lad had caught the sounds of firing in that direction, and whose report had led a number of others to turn curiously toward the Devil's Dump, just in time to catch a glimpse of the stage as it came dashing recklessly down the long slope.

"And how ye ever made it without—whar's the mules, Tommy?"

Triplock burst into a flood of curses and oburgations, at the same time trying to tell his story all in a single breath, only succeeding in making a still worse jumble of it all; but, then, little by little the affair was cleared up, and nearly every eye within range was turned upon that handsome stranger who had performed such a marvelous feat.

There was a disposition shown by nearly all of that gathering to make a hero out of this Sport in Velvet, but that worthy objected, catching at the first excuse to turn the tide in another and more practical direction.

Nathan Piercy seemed still dazed, still distracted on account of his missing daughter, and guided thus, Verne Velvet urged the little company to do what might lay in their power to aid the old gentleman.

It was only necessary to give the citizens a fair inkling of what had taken place, then an eager rush was made at the Devil's Dump by one and all, on the wild chance of still catching the road-agents at or near the scene of their recent exploit.

Nathan Piercy was among the foremost, now, the prospect of action serving to clear his wits and to restore his bodily powers.

The white horse was quickly in the

lead with its new rider, Velvet running lightly at his side, one hand ready to support the banker in case he should show signs of dizziness or other weakness.

That rush up the slope met with no resistance, and when the crest was fairly won, nothing at all was to be seen of the enemy, living or dead.

Tommy Triplock gave a yell of joy as he caught sight of his beloved wheelers at one side of the road, held fast by trailing lines, now tangled among the scrubby growth; but even as he made an awkward dive that way, his tune of joy turned to a doleful howl; for yonder lay his lead span, shot down in their tracks.

For a few minutes all was confusion, as the eager citizens scattered about the scene of the hold-up, yet through it all ran a certain amount of system, if not of order.

Keen-eyed men were seeking for sign which might tell them who these unexampled villains really were, or show them in which quarter they might with reason be looked for now.

Poor Mr. Piercy was afoot, now, and half-distractedly moving to and fro, now calling aloud upon the name of his daughter, then begging friends to aid him in effecting her rescue.

The road-agent who had fallen while struggling with the banker of Frisky Flat had disappeared, doubtless carried off by his fellows, lest an examination of his corpse should end in identifying the living.

If any of that lawless company had fallen before that reckless charge and rapid shooting by the Velvet Sport, nothing remained to show as much, and with a cheery little laugh Verne congratulated himself upon his poor marksmanship.

"Not that I'm so hotly in sympathy with the rogues, mind you, gentlemen," he hastened to add, with keen twinkle in his nut-brown eyes. "In fact, I did the best I knew how on short notice, but—"

"An' nary 'nother man I know could 'a' done hafe as well!" enthusiastically cut in honest Mark Visner, grasping a white hand and wringing it with almost fierce gratitude, as he recalled that awful dash downward to what had seemed certain death. "Ef ever I fergit it, man, may I never git furer from hell then I think we was—over yender!"

Verne Velvet turned it off with a laugh, and then, as the scene had been pretty well looked over, he asked attention for a minute, then spoke of the sounds which had come to his ears as the first intimation of mischief in the air.

"I just caught a glimpse of a couple of fellows on foot, running the same way those hoofstruckes sounded," he added, when Nathan Piercy broke in with another half-crazed appeal for aid in rescuing his child from the perils which almost surely surrounded her.

The banker was both respected and loved by his fellow-citizens, and with stern cries for vengeance against those doers of evil, another rush was made, heading toward the side-pass mentioned by the Sport in Velvet.

The afternoon had fairly spent itself and the shades of evening were deepening when that rush was made; but there were keen eyes among those now interested, and even after that gloomy defile was fairly entered, men called attention to various signs which seemed to prove they were upon the right scent.

Amid all this rustle and hot interest there was something which gave Verne Velvet a warmer interest in the affair, and presently his suspicions of double playing were confirmed by the words and actions of one stalwart fellow in particular.

Only a person who was on the alert for some such betrayal could have read the whole aright, but after a bit of keen and covert watching the Sport felt fairly assured that at least one traitor was among this earnest band of rescuers.

For one thing, this person joined the

party after they reached the scene of the hold-up, instead of coming with the others from Frisky Flat; and for another, he seemed trying to throw as many obstacles in the way of swift pursuit as he well could, working by himself.

"It's dollars to doughnuts young Kerlin has tuck a scoot 'round through the hills with the gal," he declared, boldly. "An' while we're done barkin' shins an' reskin' our blessed necks this-a-way—ugh!"

With a trip and stumble the fellow sprawled upon the ground just ahead of the Sport in Velvet, but that was not sufficient to foil those keen eyes, and giving the man a quick shove which sent him further, Verne caught up a glittering object and held it aloft for recognition.

Nathan Piercy gave a cry and start, snatching at the jewel as it swung from that white hand, huskily speaking:

"It's her's—it's Eula's bracelet which her mother—oh, my child! My poor, poor child!"

As the agitated father brokenly explained how Eula had worn the bracelet while with him on that ill-starred trip, friends gathering more closely around him, Dan Furlong limped apart, rubbing his barked shins and mumbling curses, which were very sincere, if not so very loud.

And then, seemingly from close behind him, came a low but fairly distinct voice, pronouncing the words:

"What've ye done with yer mask, pardy?"

"I've got it right—" began the fellow, one hand rising to his bosom as he turned swiftly—to give a low cry of amazement as he failed to note aught human or friendly in that precise quarter.

Verne Velvet felt the fellow wheel and flash an uneasy glance upon himself among others, but he gave no sign. Yet he had pretty well confirmed his belief that Dan Furlong was indeed one of the thieving gang.

Again Nathan Piercy begged his friends to lend their aid, and once more the Sport in Velvet came to the front, speaking swiftly, earnestly:

"We'd be lower than the beasts of the field, gentlemen, if we were to turn a deaf ear to this poor man's plea for aid and rescue. I am a stranger to you all, and so speak as a private in the ranks rather than a leader, but this much I will say:

"He who hangs back now is worse than a cur! He who refuses to help a worthy gentleman in distress is unfit to abide among white men! And when we all know that a lady is in need of our assistance—friends, that settles it so far as I am concerned. I enlist for three years or for the war!"

Not such a mighty waste of breath, yet his end was gained. As a single voice came the stern cry to press on until the lady was rescued, and notwithstanding his uneasy doubts, Dan Furlong felt that he dare not hold back just yet.

Fired by these and similar speeches, the rescuing party pressed on through the gathering gloom, showing no lack of eagerness while there promised to be a fair chance of rushing upon the fugitives or those who set forth in armed pursuit of Kent Kerlin and his fair charge.

But then that pass came to an end, opening out and leaving a wide choice of routes without anything to indicate just what direction the ones ahead may have taken.

Again the hopes of the half-distracted father sank low, for even he could realize how nearly impossible it would be to hold the faint scent across an open tract like this, with nothing more definite to guide them.

But Verne Velvet kept on the keen alert, now leading, then falling back to drop a word of cheer for that suffering

parent, and through it all keeping a watchful eye upon the fellow whom he more than suspected was a member of that lawless gang.

Although a stranger to all of those present, the Velvet Sport felt fairly certain that both Jack Houdin and Mark Visner were honest men. He knew how terribly their lives had been put in jeopardy by the road-agents, and hence felt that they would be more than ready to aid in fetching punishment upon those demons in human guise.

Watching his chance, then, Verne Velvet dropped a word of warning into their ears, bidding each keep a wary watch upon Dan Furlong, ready to take action without further direction in case circumstances should seem to warrant.

When the trail seemed fairly lost, the Sport asked for a fire to be kindled in order to resume their quest with a better chance of success.

While this was being done, himself apparently one of the most eager to get the blaze fairly going, Velvet again brought his peculiar arts into requisition, and for the second time Dan Furlong was startled by a voice for which he vainly sought a body to fit.

"Keerful, pardy! Trouble a-comin' ef ye don't git shet o' that thar mask! Best hide it afore—gwine to be searched fer shore!"

Half-bewildered the fellow turned from side to side as he looked for warning mate, but without seeing aught to lend him encouragement or friendly support.

Once more blind instinct sent a hand fumbling at his bosom as though something might be hidden there which scorched his skin.

All this Verne Velvet saw while apparently with eyes and care for naught save that now kindling fire.

Frightened all the more because he failed to spot the friend who took such a keen interest in his welfare, Dan Furlong moved restlessly to and fro, seeking to slip away from the spot, yet checked at each turn by finding another of the party barring his way.

Then the bright glow of crackling flames shot up in air, casting a cheery light round about; but before any further steps could be taken toward recovering the lost trail, a wild outcry came, and with the sound of fiercely struggling men.

Then a hoarse voice uprose from that struggling mass to utter:

"Hyar he is, boss! We done ketched him—ketched him a-hidin' of it—blame his nasty pictur'!"

CHAPTER VI.

BREAKING DOWN A RASCAL'S NERVE.

If others were in ignorance of the meaning of this uproar, Verne Velvet had no difficulty in giving it a correct interpretation, and springing in front of the startled group, he cried out:

"Hold your hands, everybody! This is a work of justice, not evil-doing!"

Dan Furlong, pounced upon by those two honest watchmen without sound or warning, was making an ugly fight of it in spite of the odds, but now the voice of Jack Houdin rose in triumph:

"Thar! Stay putt, blame ye, Dan Furlong!"

"Fur we've got a double-cinch onto ye, Danny Boy!" added Visner.

A torrent of questions broke from the crowd, but not until the first made sure the suspect's escape was impossible for the time being, did the Dude in Velvet offer an explanation.

"Touch lightly, gentlemen!" he spoke with stern distinctness, one hand closing upon a shoulder as the two miners lifted their captive to his feet. "Let us come into the light, so you can see as well as hear."

"I hain't done nothin' fer the likes o' you to—shell a cussed squirt like him run an' over us, rough-shod, pardy?"

"If I can't show fair cause for all this, gentlemen, I'm here to take the consequences!" coolly averred the stranger, smiling as he swept those faces with his lustrous brown eyes.

"You know me, boys," cried the prisoner in desperation, making an effort to break away from those strong hands. "An' this yer fool is—I'll kill ye fer this ef I ever git my hands loose, cuss ye!"

With the gentlest of fingers Verne Velvet tapped those lips, as he spoke, as one in authority:

"Take it easy, my pretty fellow, for you'll need all your breath ere you pull out of this ugly box. Fair warning, now!"

"What has he done, pray?" asked one of the citizens, whose gray hairs entitled him to respect.

"That is exactly what I propose fetching to light, my dear sir; and I'm not going to ask you to take my unsupported word for it, either," answered the seeming dude, stirring the fire so that its flames shot higher and the circle of ruddy light was broadened.

"I hain't done nothin' which isn't—"

"We done ketched him a-doin' of it, gents!" cut in Jack Houdin, as he gave the unruly prisoner a warning shake.

"Doing what?"

"Hidin' of this yer riggin', no less!" declared Visner, stepping further to the front and holding up a crumpled object which then was deftly shaken out to show all—a mask of black cloth, with eyelets in front and strong rubber band to keep the article in place when a sure disguise was necessary.

A brief silence of surprise, then an ugly roar from nearly every man present; and fearing a too sudden punishment for the captive, Verne Velvet cried out anew:

"Steady, all! It's simple justice we want, gentlemen, not an exhibition of lynch-law. And that we may get at the bottom facts of this case I beg of you, as honest men and reputable citizens—"

"It's all a durn lie! It's a put-up job fer to down me like—a lie! All a cussed lie!" fairly howled the suspect.

Among those who stared in half-bewilderment upon this totally unexpected scene was Nathan Piercy.

Not until that damning disguise was held up in the ruddy glow of the fire did he fairly realize just what turn the card was taking; then a savage cry escaped his lips and he sprung forward with clutching fingers aimed at the suspect's throat.

"You devil! My child was—you helped abuse her and—show me where she is, or I'll tear your black heart out, and—"

Wrought to utter desperation by his fears, the banker might have worked evil to the prisoner, but Verne Velvet caught the maddened man as he came, holding him powerless with apparent ease.

"Quiet, sir, I beg of you!" he said, in soothing tones, while holding fast to the struggling father, your daughter shall come to no further harm if we can hinder, and in order to best serve her interests you must quiet down for the present."

With strength well-nigh spent by that fierce outburst, Nathan Piercy gave way, permitting friends to lead him back and lend the support he now so sorely needed.

When this was done, the gray head who had spoken before—Andrew Mapes, one of Frisky Flat's most worthy representatives—stepped to the front and laid a gentle hand upon the suspect's shoulder as he spoke:

"You shall have a square deal, Daniel Furlong. I promise you that, and I know that these gentlemen will back me up in that pledge."

But Furlong rudely shook off that kindly touch, and gave an ugly oath, at which Mark Visner chuckled grimly.

"Taint common jestice Danny's hopin' fer, boss, but a show fer to hit tall tim-

ber with a hot foot. An' ef he was to—hold your grips, pardner!"

"You bet I jest will, now!" sturdily declared Jack Houdin.

Somewhat daunted by the reception given his well-meant efforts, Mr. Mapes turned toward the Sport, to ask:

"Of what is Furlong accused, sir? We all know him—have known him for the past year and over."

"While I am a complete stranger," smilingly added the man in wine-colored velvet. "Granted, but I'm hoping for a better acquaintance ere long, and until then I'll strive to keep inside the bounds of modesty."

"As for this fellow: speak up, my good friends, and tell just what started this row."

"Waal, that's easy told," bluntly answered, Visner, again snaking out that tell-tale piece of perforated cloth. "Dan was tryin' to hide this yer thing under a flat stone when we done jumped him."

"A lie!" desperately cried the suspect, catching at the faintest of hopes; "I was jest—I see it layin' thar, an' wanted to see ef—so help me—"

With prompt hand Houdin smothered that impious malediction, and then spoke in sturdy tones:

"You all kin see who's doin' of the lyin', friends, fer hain't we bin huntin' too mighty close all over hyar fer to the pile o' us miss the bigness o' sech a thing as that? You bet your sweet life!"

"And I hereby charge Daniel Furlong with being a member of the road-agent gang which held up the stage—"

"An' butchered my lead mules—durn 'em all over!" fairly exploded Tommy Triplock, unable to get over that sore loss.

Again Nathan Piercy called aloud for vengeance. Once more the man under surveillance declared his utter innocence. Then Andrew Mapes spoke in grave accents, his well-known honesty lending weight to each word he pronounced.

"There is but one fair way to get at it, gentlemen. Form an open-air court, and let both accused and his accusers be heard. Shall it be that way, my friends?"

General assent was given, and several voices were uplifted to nominate Mr. Mapes as judge of that impromptu court.

This was rather more than the gentleman intended, but he had never been known to shirk when duty called, and this was not to prove the exception.

With a few well-chosen words he accepted the office, then asked the two men who captured the suspect why they took such action.

"Waal, yer Honor, we was lookin' fer jest sech a doin's," frankly admitted Mark Visner, speaking for both. "An' so, when we ketched the critter tryin' fer to hide this yer mask—"

"It's not mine! I never laid eyes onto it afore—they lie like sin, gents, all!" fiercely asservated the prisoner.

Before either of the men to whose efforts Furlong owed his capture could refute this charge, a strange-sounding voice made itself heard, coming from just whence none there present seemed to know.

"A lie, Daniel Furlong! A lie, where only the truth can save you from just punishment!"

The suspect crouched and shivered, turning a frightened glance overhead like one expecting there to meet the face of his accuser.

"Order, gentlemen, all!" rebuked the judge. "Who was it spoke those last words?"

"A lover of truth; a hater of all evil!" came the same sepulchral tones, now apparently from out the gloom which surrounded that firelit circle.

"It's the devil! It's devils' work, an' I can't—ye lie, cuss ye all over!" hoarsely came from the trembling prisoner, crouching still lower to the earth, no longer supported by his amazed guards.

They, too, were wholly taken aback

by this spookish business, and scarcely less puzzled to account for those sounds.

Giving the now unnerved knave no time to rally from his superstitious fears, the voice again was heard, coming from the darkness overhead, to all seeming.

"'Tis the soul of your pard speaking to you, Daniel Furlong; a soul purified as by fire! Like you I was a dupe of far wickeder men, and by listening to their evil counsel, I came to my death this day!"

"Don't let me go, fer I cain't—let me go, I beg o' ye!" huskily gasped the frightened criminal, now almost beyond defending himself from those dangerous accusations.

"Repent! Repent and turn aside from evil while yet there is time, I beg of you, old pardy!" again urged that bodiless voice. "Confess all and go free; deny the truth, and die like I died this day!"

Always superstitious, Dan Furlong could endure no more, believing as he did that this was voice of spirit or of ghost; and flinging up his hands with a most unearthly screech of terror, he fell in a quivering heap to earth in a fit.

So it seemed at first sight, but his rapid restoration to senses would make it appear otherwise—the effect, no doubt, of pure imagination working upon a guilt-burdened mind.

Through all this the Sport in Velvet was keenly upon the alert, feeling sure that this man was guilty, and hence a justifiable subject to work upon where the whole truth was so important.

And so, paying no heed to the startled cries and questions which came so plentifully from the crowd, Verne Velvet took up the inquisition the moment he fancied his human game could respond.

Furlong was too greatly shattered in nerve to speak very clearly or with full coherence, yet he let escape more than sufficient to convict himself of membership in that lawless gang, and to justify that arrest.

"Tell the whole truth, Furlong," the Sport advised when Dan was able to again stand erect. "You've said enough to condemn yourself, and now—buy yourself freedom from worse!"

"Ef I do—I never done nothin' which—I didn't—!"

The accused looked from face to face, his naturally gaunt visage seeming unusually haggard, as he was thus brought fairly face to face with the punishment befitting his sins.

"It's your only chance," urged the Sport, then adding in lowered tones for those ears alone: "Take your dead pard's advice, man, and thus cheat the gallows while ye may!"

"Ef I knowed—ef ye'd all sw'ar to let me go free, 'thout ary pullin' hemp or—but I cain't trust ye!"

"What do you all say, gentlemen?" cried the Sport in Velvet.

"If Furlong makes a clean breast of it; if he tells us all about the hold-up and just who engineered that affair; shall he go free?"

"I'll tell it all ef I kin on'y be let go free!" huskily cut in the prisoner, at length beginning to fairly realize the full extent of his present peril.

Without a single dissenting voice the answer was made: let him tell all, without reserve, and Daniel Furlong might go free for then.

Nerved by this promise, the accused stood more erect, but ere he could fairly begin that confession, a ruddy glare briefly lit up the darkness toward which he faced, and at the accompanying report, the poor knave flung up both arms and fell like a log!

CHAPTER VII.

WHO FIRED THE DEATH-SHOT?

With all the force of a bolt from out a cloudless sky came this fatal interruption.

All eyes were fixed upon the cowed captive, and all save the one who was primarily responsible for that mysterious

voice feeling most powerfully wrought up by the strange experience.

Not one had a hint as to what was coming, and even the Sport in Velvet was caught entirely unawares by that death-shot from out the gloom.

He was gazing fixedly upon Dan Furlong, bending his whole will-power to that one end; holding the unnerved knave true from wavering again until the full confession should be made.

And so it happened that Verne Velvet saw that awful change take place all in a moment of time; saw the livid spot start into existence nearly in the centre of that low-browed forehead, to be followed immediately by a gush of mingled blood and brains.

And so, swift as light itself came the full realization; death had claimed that witness while yet his tale was untold!

The entire company was cast into wild-est confusion by that totally unexpected tragedy, and stout-hearted fellows shrunk away in dismay as Daniel Furlong flung up his arms and fell to earth a corpse; but Verne Velvet lost barely a half-score seconds ere he rallied.

He seemed to catch the last fading trace of that lurid glare, and catching the line, as by instinct, he began shooting, at the same instant springing forward with the stern call:

"This way, men! Catch or kill the infernal villain who would—"

His fierce speech was cut short by a wild yell arising from ahead, and as he instinctively paused, weapon lifting a bit, there followed a curious crashing sound not so easy to recognize.

"Take keer o' the jump-off!" yelled one of the citizens, in swift warning, then making a dive for the fire, out of which he snatched a blazing brand, swinging it once around his head before hurling it in that direction.

Verne Velvet ducked as the fiery missile flashed above his head, then gave a brief cry as the brand struck against branch of tree, to scatter a shower of sparks in air, then drop down—not to the solid rocks as one might suppose, but to vanish from sight and hearing without sound or leaving fire behind.

Then the Dude in Velvet remembered what he had forgotten in rush of excitement, and as he advanced with greater caution, he sent voice back to command.

"Fetch lights this way, friends! I'm not so sure—lively with those lights!"

Warned by that falling shower of sparks Velvet paused when near "the jump-off," and as his eyes grew trained to the change of light, he saw that a wide-branching tree grew on the very verge of a chasm or precipice, the full extent of which could only be surmised as yet.

But flaring brands were hastily brought by eager hands, and by the light thus afforded, the situation became better known.

Their way in that direction was effectually barred by a natural break which formed a precipice too deep for the unaided eye to fathom by night, a portion of the escarpment being sheltered by that well-branched tree, from one low limb of which now dangled the end of a worn lariat or trail-rope.

"Looky yender!" cried Mark Visner, pointing with his brand the more surely to draw notice that way. "Shot 'er off—cut the rope with a blue whistler an' never—whar's the blame' critter gone to?"

"Tuck a drap down to glory—I don't think!"

This was hint sufficient, and as the excited men pressed as near to the brink as might be, first one and then another flaming brand was dropped down the almost perpendicular rock-wall, giving short-lived glimpses of what was hidden by the gloom below.

Again keen-eyed Visner gave a yell of discovery, real or imagined, following it with the spluttering speech:

"Looky—thar he is, now! Done bu'sted a tree all to—I say, you feller!"

But the last torch faded into darkness, and no other gaze was lucky enough to catch even a glimpse of that real or purely imaginary figure toward whom the veteran's hail was so vigorously hurled.

"Ef it wasn't, hope may never see the back o' my neck, now!" forcibly vowed the honest old fellow, as a rush was made for fresh illuminating material. "Some sort o' blame critter jumpin' fer closer kiver, jest whar—an' the pore devil is plum dead, too!"

"Nur he never told who shot my lead mules!" dolefully cut in Tommy Triplock, the man of a single idea.

Verne Velvet was one of the few who held chained tongue through those excited minutes of hasty investigation, but his keen wits were working all the more swiftly, and by this time he had reached a fairly plausible solution.

"Come, men, we're wasting valuable time which might be better employed," he cried, sharply. "Who can show the way down to the bottom?"

"The quickest way is to jump, pardner, but—thar is a way, ef ye go 'round a bit!"

"We've got to go, and in a hurry, too! Can't you understand? The man who fired that murderous shot counted on escaping by sliding down that rope while we were thrown into confusion, and—"

"An' you done cut him off like a—whooray fer the stranger!"

"And he may be lying below here, dead or crippled!" almost fiercely cried the Sport in Velvet.

"Which I done glimpsed him scuffling off like he was—"

"All the more reason, then, for us to waste as little time as we can help," sternly cut in Velvet. "Come! show the quickest way, somebody, and let's get at the bottom facts if it isn't too late already!"

Thanks to these repeated urgings, something like order was coming out of rank confusion, and armed with fire-brands which were easily kept aglow by motion, a more systematic rush was made, headed by the citizen who claimed to know of a "short-cut" to the bottom of that break.

The volunteer guide proved as good as his word, and with little further loss of time the party found themselves at the foot of that grim precipice over which the assassin almost certainly had plunged after discharging the shot which sealed the lips of Dan Furlong in death.

Here Verne Velvet again took the lead, and partly through instinct, partly aided by the light held on the rocks above by one of the party who had remained behind with Nathan Piercy, the Sport soon reached the spot which one and all now felt so absorbing an interest in.

"Look whar he done bu'sted that grapevine, will ye?" excitedly cried Jack Houdin, hand pointing out what his eyes had first discovered.

"Hunt for man or sign!" cried the Sport, sternly, himself setting the example.

But scant was their reward, and in a very brief space of time the only plausible solution was reached: the author of that death-shot had, as by a miracle, escaped paying full penalty due his desperate crime.

There were the broken vines and splintered limbs of the tree into which he must have fallen, and there, caught by one end, was the bullet-severed rope through aid of which he counted upon escape.

ved the point of descent past doubting, but after so much was found, all else failed.

There was no body of dead or crippled criminal to be seen, nor any waste of blood through which that still unidentified knave might be trailed to his hiding place.

As a last chance Verne Velvet had

his followers divide and make close search of the gulch in both directions, with orders to take their human game alive if found.

"He cheated us out of learning the whole scheme through his murderous shot, up yonder, but we'll square all that if we can only fasten our clutches upon his carcass!"

"Ef it wasn't fer them bu'sted vines, yender, blamed ef I wouldn't begin fer to think—an' I hain't so mighty shore es she be!"

"What is it, pardner?" asked Velvet of puzzled Houdin.

"Waal, you kin laugh 'til you snort ef ye feels that-a-way," doggedly mumbled the uneasy veteran, as his eyes flashed restlessly around them. "But ef a spook kin talk, cain't he shoot? An' of—blamed ef I don't begin to feel like I wanted fer to git back home again—I do!"

Possibly others of the little party felt something of the same sort, although they hardly dared put the sentiment into such blunt speech as the old prospecter; but, while keeping well bunched, the search was pressed until all realized the folly of wasting further time over it.

Past all doubting, he who fired that death-shot had escaped for the time being. Possibly for all time, since there was no clue to his identity, query as the searchers might.

Going over that portion of the case, then, Verne Velvet led the way back to the upper level, where poor Dan Furlong was lying still and stark in death, cut down by hand of friend rather than of enemy.

For not one of those now gazing upon the bullet-branded corpse for a moment doubted the truth: that the death-shot was fired wholly and solely to prevent that confession.

Then the Sport in Velvet asked for attention, making a brief but sensible speech, in which he ran over the main facts, then showed how worse than useless it would be to search further for a trail that night.

"Still, our work has not been wholly in vain, gentlemen," he continued, earnestly. "Although some desperate dastard has murdered the one from whose lips we hoped to win full information as to the members of this lawless gang, don't forget that fowl of the same plumage will naturally flock together."

"By spotting those with whom Furlong as a rule consorted with, you almost surely can ferret out the prime criminals. And so—this!"

"We can do nothing more here, and instead of losing time, we will be saving it by turning back to town, there to recruit and prepare for taking the trail by daylight."

So far Nathan Piercy had listened in silence, but now he burst forth in agitated appeal, begging his friends to find and give back to him his beloved daughter.

No need to reproduce his appeal. It caused more eyes than one to grow dim with sympathy, and Verne Velvet but expressed the sentiments of all when he gently took an arm and spoke to the banker of Frisky Flat:

"I promise you sir, to do all that mortal man can to that end. We will take up the hunt again, and never give over until your daughter is restored unharmed to your arms."

"Do that and—I'm not so rich, sir, but I can and will pay—"

"Your thanks—just so," crisply interrupted the Sport, but not in unkindly tones. "Pay enough, too, but in order to win that reward, sir, we've got to go at the matter in purely business fashion."

"You are not strong enough to stand any further racket /such as this, and so—"

"I am strong enough to follow where any other man can lead!" declared the banker, with sudden fire. "While my poor girl is—oh, if harm comes her way I want to—kill me first, oh Lord!"

It was another pitiful break-down, and only confirmed the Velvet Sport in his belief that Mr. Piercy must be taken back home before still worse should befall.

As the easiest and smoothest method of carrying his point, Velvet talked to the distracted father, showing how far from likely it was that bodily harm could have come to his child.

"The young man who rescued her was acting wholly for her good, don't you see?" he argued, as one might to a fretful child. "He got away unharmed, as I can testify, and surely no footmen could really hope to run him down with the start he had of them."

"Unless they cut him off when he tried to turn toward home!"

"Of course, he'd guard against that, sir. And, do you know, I'd be willing to give odds that the young folks have already got there!"

"You mean—what?"

"That even now your daughter may be at home, wondering and grieving that you remain so long away!" earnestly spoke the Sport, catching at the chance thus offered.

His words produced the desired effect, and with pitiful eagerness the bereaved father urged what he had so recently resisted; he could not move fast enough now that their faces were turned toward Frisky Flat once more.

As in coming, the white steed was devoted to the banker, and Verne Velvet guided and guarded the old man as he might have treated his own parent under similar circumstances.

The corpse of Dan Furlong was taken along, bound upon the back of a gentle horse; grewsome companionship, but not one among them all even hinted at leaving the carcass of the criminal out among those rocks, to fall a prey to the skulking wolves.

Although the distance was considerable, the miles were covered in fair time, and long ere that night was spent the little company drew nigh to Frisky Flat, Nathan Piercy feverishly eager to reach home and again clasp to his bosom the form of his idolized daughter.

Noticing this, Verne Velvet began to feel a bit uneasy for the consequences, but 'twas too late for thought of that now; and when the deserted house was reached, and no Eula answered his eager call, Nathan Piercy sunk upon the threshold like one smitten by death.

CHAPTER VIII.

GONE ASTRAY IN THE MOUNTAINS.

It was a desperate chance which Kent Kerlin caught at, and one which might have cowed even a bold heart; yet he made the effort and succeeded far beyond what any man had the right to expect.

Those pistols barked viciously in his rear, but it was wild firing clear through, and not a bullet cut clothes or broke skin, even if any came nigh enough those fleeing shapes for keen ear to catch the weird whistle of grooved lead.

A wild, break-neck dash until that short stretch of straight road was covered, then the rescuer gave vent to a shout of mingled exultation and defiance as the confiscated horse dashed around the bend, placing a natural shield between them and those in chase.

And so the flight was pressed, Kent Kerlin holding the nearly fainting maiden upon the saddle in front, letting no grass grow beneath those hoofs as he urged the good steed onward at a gallop.

He turned aside from the main road as soon as permitted by the surroundings, and after riding for some little distance, drew rein and half turned to the rear as he quickly spoke:

"I hardly think that—courage, Eula! Even if those devils should chase—hark!"

The maiden was scarcely able to talk, then, thanks to her agitation and fears for father as for self; but Kent Kerlin

bent head in acute listening for a few seconds.

Shouts came floating on the air from the rear, and a half-smothered execration rose in his throat as he knew the hounds were on the scent.

"They're coming, Eula," he said, with forced calmness while still listening. "I hardly think they will suspect my turning aside from the main trail, but even if they should—"

"You will not let them—my poor father!"

"I'd die ten thousand deaths before—ha! They have—they are coming this way, darling, but we can easily cheat them, even yet!"

Kent Kerlin sent their mount onward with a touch of heel and shake of rein, following that gloomy passage until it gradually widened out into a broad stretch of rugged, uneven country where 'twould be difficult for a trail to be followed unless by aid of hounds.

Once or twice menacing yells came from their rear, giving warning of dogged chase, but poor Eula was too strongly agitated as yet to give thought to that curious conduct, while Kerlin kept his thoughts to himself for the time being.

Presently the maiden began to rally, showing something of her natural spirit. And then her fears for her father's safety added to her courage, and she begged Kent to turn back to his assistance.

"I only wish I might, Eula," he answered, gloomily. "I'd run any risk to help him, if I thought by so doing he might be served; but now—even if I was there, what good could I do?"

"I don't—surely you might—"

"I haven't even a penknife with me, Eula! Those hounds stripped me clean; they took my guns and—I'll defend you with my life, darling, and give in only with my latest gasp, but what more can I do?"

The maiden shivered a bit as she heard, and there was something more of apprehension in her gaze as she looked toward the rear, where the shadows of falling night were already thickening, telling that the day was fairly spent.

Evidently Kent Kerlin felt that he had sufficiently excused his persistent flight, for he made no further excuses, keeping the doubly-laden animal on the move, although the nature of the ground rendered anything like speed out of the question now that darkness was coming.

For fully an hour after night had come over them the young man pressed on, now in one direction, now in another; but then he drew rein with a vigor which was almost savage, and as Eula gave a low cry of affright, Kerlin spoke:

"It's no use lying about it, Eula; I've lost my way!"

"I don't—what is it, Mr. Kerlin?"

Kent forced a brief laugh as he slipped from the horse's haunches to earth, pressing a hand of the frightened girl with his strong palm by way of additional assurance as he spoke:

"Oh, it's nothing to get scared over, darling; nothing to even worry over. I'm not so well posted about these in—these hills, you see, and so we've got a bit astray."

"There isn't danger? Surely we are not—we can get back home?"

"Of course we will, my dear girl, although we may have to make a night of it out here, and—let me help you down, Eula."

She yielded in silence, although clearly bewildered and ill at ease.

Kent Kerlin saw as much, and hastened to reassure his fair charge.

"It'll come out all right, little lady; I pledge you my word. The night is warm enough, and we can easily stand a star-lit vigil for once. Or, if you prefer, Eula, what's to hinder your catching a nice little sleep to freshen you for the home-going in the morning?"

"Then—we can go home?" timidly asked the maiden.

"With daylight to show us the right way, why not? Only for now—shall I tell you the whole truth, darling?"

"Yes! I can bear it if—if I only knew father was safe!"

"Of course he is safe; why would he not be, pray? Those rascals will find his money, of course, and then they'll let the rest go free. Only I feared for you, my darling!"

Eula gave a low sob, but words came not. The poor girl was still unnerved in a measure, and it would take time for her to wholly rally.

Acting like one who feels there is no other course to pursue, Kent Kerlin took the coil of rope from saddle-bow, and put out his nag, removing saddle and bridle as well.

Leaving the animal to fare as best he might in that barren tract, he returned to where Eula was in waiting, spreading the warm saddle blanket at the base of a bowlder which would serve to support their backs, then with gentle force induced her to be seated.

Dropping down beside the maiden, Kent took one of her cold and trembling hands in his, pressing it warmly as he looked into her troubled eyes, then speaking, softly, cheerily:

"Don't worry over all this, little lady, for it's bound to come out right in the end."

"If I could only think so, sir!" with a sigh.

"You must think so; and why not? Nothing can harm you here. We are gone astray a bit, true, but what of that? Those devils can't find us, either! And if they should—"

"Don't—please don't!"

"Why do you always try to put me off, darling?" passionately murmured Kerlin, drawing a bit closer to the woman he hoped to make his wife in good time. "Why will you not let me tell you—I must, Eula!"

"When I saw that black-hearted demon menacing you with death—and I powerless to defend my heart's treasure—"

"Don't—I beg of you, not, sir!" unsteadily spoke the maiden, shrinking from the arm which was stealing about her trim waist.

"If you could only guess how dearly, how madly, I love you, Eula!"

"You must not—I cannot listen to such words, Mr. Kerlin!" cried she, attempting to arise, but checked by his powerful grasp.

"Is it because you fear for your father, Eula?" Kent forced himself to ask with calm tones. "Is it because this is hardly time or place for lovemaking that you—"

"No, sir; I mean that never— Oh, Mr. Kerlin, why will you force me to say it? Indeed, and indeed I am grateful; I feel that I can never give you thanks enough for all you have done in my behalf this day."

"Then prove it by giving me—not thanks, my darling, but—yourself! Tell me that I may hope for—"

"Nothing more than my sincerest friendship, Mr. Kerlin," interposed the young woman, her tones steady and her trembling ending.

A brief silence which both must have felt keenly, then the young man gave a short, bitter laugh, after which he spoke, almost sneeringly:

"In other words, you'll take gracious pleasure in being my—sister, Eula?"

"Yes, if you will permit me. Oh, Mr. Kerlin, why will you force me to appear so ungrateful? Why did you not take the hint I gave, and let all remain as it was before—"

She broke off as Kerlin rose abruptly to his feet, giving his athletic figure a vigorous shake like one seeking to cast off an unwelcome burden, then moving away to a little distance, standing there with folded arms and bowed head.

The poor girl felt all this most keenly,

yet she dared not call to the young man, lest her so doing fan vain hopes alight.

Presently Kerlin fell to work gathering material for a fire, which he soon had kindled in a sheltered spot, feeding the young flames until he had a pile of small sticks well ablaze.

The spot chosen for this was only a few yards away from the bowlder against which Eula was leaning, and then Kent slowly came nearer, holding silence for a few minutes longer; hours they seemed to the maiden.

Then the young man spoke, soberly, yet with an undercurrent of almost fierce passion in his tones.

"All right, Eula! I'll wait; I'll force myself to rest content with matters as they now are, living on sweet hope of better days to come. If only—darling! I can't help it, Eula;—I've got to ask just one thing from you. Will you grant it, dear?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Kerlin?"

"Give me a little hope, I beg of you, darling! Tell me—swear on your sacred honor that there isn't any—any other man ahead of me, Eula Piercy?"

If he really doubted the truth, that little cry, those burning blushes as both hands flew up to cover the face as it lowered, banished all such forever; and with a low sound which might have been a groan of misery or curse of rage, Kent Kerlin turned away once more, standing moodily there at the edge of the fire-light.

For a long time silence reigned, and it was only broken when Eula gave a low cry as of terror, which caused Kerlin to wheel swiftly and—find himself faced by a revolver muzzle!

CHAPTER IX.

"ALL FOR YOUR SAKE, DARLING!"

"I've got ye lined fer keeps, pardner!"

It was almost as though the nolder of that weapon had risen up out of the solid earth, for never a sound or warning came to eye or ear until the vantage-point was won, and now Kent Kerlin could look straight into the muzzle of a cocked revolver, just beyond the little fire which his hands had kindled.

"Hyar likewise, an' moreover, too!"

A croaking voice from but a few paces to one side, and a second shape uprose with armed right hand turned in that direction.

As by instinct Kerlin moved hands toward the place where his own firearms usually rested, but sharp and ugly-sounding came the warning from that first speaker:

"Stiddy, thar! Tetch a gun or sticker an' we'll turn ye to a riddle fer siftin' sand!"

"Flop up them 'ar dukes, pritty lad, else ye jest hone fer to take a lightin' jump clean into the middle o' glory!"

Kent stood at bay, hands clenching fiercely as they found no tools with which to meet the enemy on more equal footing.

He looked from first speaker to second, eyes fairly ablaze and pale face dull of desperation as he saw how surely he had been caught off guard by at least a portion of those outlaws from whom they had been fleeing.

The flickering glow was bright enough to show that much; faces hidden from recognition by masks of black cloth, and rude garb which may have been customary, but which lent the impression of still further disguise.

All this in a score of seconds, and then, like one who recks little for himself, the young man crouched for a pantherish leap, all unarmed though he was.

But those sturdy knaves were not to be taken unawares, and one of them spoke sharply again:

"Don't ye try to play crazy, critter! We've got ye kivered—"

"An' kin count them buttons on yer shirt like a mice!"

"Han's up or go down in a nasty heap, boy!"

Frightened sadly by these menacing words and actions, Eula broke into a hardly articulate appeal for mercy, and stung by recognition of the peril he had brought her into, Kent Kerlin gave a low, savage cry and strode forward.

Only to halt and even shrink back the next instant as one of those disguised rascals shifted his aim, harshly croaking forth in warning:

"Make a kick, blame ye, an' thar'll be one gal less to play fool with honest men! Back, ye hot-head!"

"Plug her ef he don't, pardy; fer—think better of it, hey?"

Kent Kerlin saw how ruthlessly that knave was covering the maiden with pistol, and what he would not do for himself, that forced him to do for the sake of the woman he so passionately adored.

Shrinking back with hands flying up above his head, he hoarsely panted in reply:

"Hold, ye devils! Don't harm the lady or—stop, I say!"

"Ho! Ho! That sort o' pinches ye, does it? Waal, critter, you jest play like ye was a weenty bit of a lamb, an' we was—keep them 'ar dukes up, blame ye!"

"I kin hit a 'skeeter flyin', an' that's mighty sight leetler mark then a gal against a rock, ye mind!"

A mingled curse and groan, then Kent Kerlin yielded, hoarsely crying as though that submission called for excuse:

"It's all for you—ail for your sake, darling!"

"With a yum-yum 'tachment—ho! ho! ho!" laughed the larger of the road-agents, moving closer, though still holding his pistol at a level with the young man's heart.

"Git 'round onto the blind side o' him, pardy," quickly warned the other knave, who held Eula under his gun the while. "He's a nasty mule fer to shoe, an' mought—don't give him ary show fer to play snatch-grab at yer gun, now!"

"Teach yer granny how to suck aigs, boy! Reckon I'm a plum' fool?"

"Don't do harm to the lady, you devils!" huskily warned Kerlin, still thinking more of Eula than of his own ugly predicament. "Spare her, and you can do what you like with me!"

"Hain't he good an' perlite, though?" sneered the burly outlaw with another coarse chuckle, coming closer, yet bearing well in mind the warning so hurriedly flung his way by the second villain.

"I don't care for myself, but if you lay but the weight of a little finger in rudeness or insult upon my—Miss Piercy—"

"Slap up the bars, will ye? Ye talk too mighty much fer ary sort o' use! Ef we can't run our own machine as ef—business, now!"

"Chuck up, too! Take a lay-down, now."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Shet trap an' lay flat on yer face, critter!" harshly commanded the outlaw, now well behind his prisoner and so fully commanding the situation.

"Come to time, pritty face, or the gal will hev to pay fer it all," was the supplemental warning which came from the lesser ruffian; less in size, if not in actual devilry.

Again the hot-headed young man showed symptoms of fierce rebellion, but once more he yielded to the love he felt for Eula, huskily repeating his earlier plea in excuse:

"It's all for your sake, my darling!"

Then, like one in dark despair, Kent Kerlin obeyed, dropping to the ground and lying there face downward while the mocking villain quickly applied a stout thong to his wrists.

"Thar!" the fellow said, drawing back a bit, and touching the captive rudely with toe of boot. "Climb up ag'in, critter!"

"You've ketched him O. K., pardy?"

"That's what I jest hev, now! An' so—stiddy, boy! Ef ye must kick, go bump yer own self fer lettin' us ketch ye so easy like this!"

"I'll kill you if—"

A broad hand swung over those lips, cutting short the fierce threat which Kent Kerlin was about to pronounce, and realizing how more than impotent he was just then, he regained his footing in surly silence.

Not until his capture was fully perfected did that wary rascal permit his aim to waver from its shivering target, but now, clearly feeling that matters were all going their way, he lowered his pistol, letting down the pointed hammer with deft ease.

"That's mo' like it!" he declared, with a nod of approval as Kerlin moved slowly toward the maiden. "Feel a heap-sight mo' white-then ye would jest now ef ye hed kept on playin' crazy fool, eh, boy?"

"Shell I better clap 'im into hobbles, too, pardy?"

"What's the use fer now?" answered the wiry representative, moving so as to stir the fire with toe of boot, chuckling in half malice as he looked toward the maiden. "You jest couldn't shoo him 'way from his own honey-love; no, ye jest couldn't, pardy?"

"Only for you—if I hadn't feared for your sake, darling!" muttered Kent as he drew nearer the spot where Eula was still sitting. "I'd rather die outright than even appear to knuckle down to such whelps—"

"Go easy, thar, critter!"

"Don't—please don't say anything to anger them more deeply, Mr. Kerlin!" murmured the maiden, affrightedly.

Kent dropped down beside her, speaking in whispers, striving as best he could to soothe her fears and brighten the prospect which lay before them both.

For a little while they were permitted to do this, the brace of road-agents content to stand near the freshened fire and watch while making sundry more or less humorous comments.

After all, matters might have been worse, Kerlin assured Eula in a whisper.

"I believe it's only a question of ransom, and I'd give my last dollar for your sake, darling!"

Eula shrunk a bit from this persistent suitor, but her natural distress was added to by fears for her father whom she had last seen in such peril.

"Ask them—if father is—oh, sir, try to make them tell me!"

The poor girl hardly knew just what words crossed her lips, but Kent Kerlin quickly caught her meaning and acted upon it without delay.

Forcing a composure which he could hardly feel in reality, he turned toward their captors and asked the question:

"What has become of this lady's father, fellows? They didn't do him any worse harm than—the truth, if it's in your hides!"

Fierce anger seemed to get the better of his judgment, but instead of showing resentment, the road-agents chuckled in unison before making cool reply:

"What come to the old gent, is it? Waal, pritty, boy, sence it's you as axes, an' you so turrible sugary all over, why—jest like this: The ole gent didn't ketch no wuss then was sot out for the couple o' ye; a short-cut down the Devil's Dump!"

Eula gave a low wail of agony at this brutal hint, but Kent dropped a soothing whisper, then muttering for her ears alone:

"It's a lie—all a malicious lie, darling! If not a lie, those scoundrels would never have told of it—like that!"

Kent's ears belonged to the captors, however, and they certainly caught enough of that whisper to guess what it all meant, for the wiry member bluntly declared:

"Easy thar, critter. We kin make

'lowance fer one ketched up as you be, right now, but thar is limits which—better button that lip o' yer own, or mebbe we'll make a button-hole which'll snet ye up fer all time an' 'tarnity; the couple in one!"

If Kent Kerlin heard, he scarcely heeded. Eula was sorely distressed by that brutal assertion, and he could think of no surer way to calm the maiden's fears than this.

"If they had really committed such a horrible deed; if they had in reality sent all over Devil's Dump, darling, they'd never admit as much to our faces, knowing as they surely do how terribly such a foul crime would be avenged by our friends. So—it's all a lie, dear girl!"

Almost in spite of herself Eula was confronted by this earnest assurance, but evidently that speech had worked scant good for the man who gave it utterance.

The road-agents squatted by the little fire, facing so as to keep their captives fairly in view, yet taking their ease after a rude fashion.

From whispers they passed on to more audible speech, and one of their sentences caused both Eula and Kent to give start and bend ear.

"Jest what was it the cap'n said when he sot us off after the two critters, pardy?"

"Eh? Said not to hurt the gal ef we could help it, but to ketch the youngster dead or livin'; an' durned ef I don't begin fer to think he'd jest a weenty bit ruther she was the—eh?"

"That's what! An' the boy—waa, he was jest plum' fool 'nough fer to kick up a he-ole row the fust thing?"

"Didn't he, now? An' wasn't we—waa, pardy, how was we to know he hedn't got full-heeled sence the start, Eh?"

"You bet ye! An' he looked like he was jest 'tarnally bound fer to chaw ha'r an' rake flesh; wasn't he, now, pardy?"

An oily chuckle found birth at this, but head nodded in prompt confirmation, and then followed the grave declaration:

"Fer a honest fact! An' he'd 'a' got clean away with our baggage, too, ef we hedn't—hey?"

Eula Piercy gave a faint gasp of horror at this, while Kent Kerlin himself looked paler than ordinary as he listened. Past all room for doubting, it was murder these villains were hinting at!

CHAPTER X.

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES.

Of course it was barely possible that these humorous knaves were inventing a unique method of passing the time away, but something in their manner, even more than in the words they used, sent a cold shiver to poor Eula's heart.

Kent Kerlin could not help seeing this, and while he might have maintained a sternly defiant attitude on his own account, he betrayed a manly anxiety for the maiden whom he had already dared so much to carry beyond peril to life, or to honor.

With a calming whisper to the maiden, then, he rose to his feet, quickly speaking as the outlaw sprung erect at his movement.

"Easy, fellows! I'm not thinking of running away or—"

"Make a break jest as quick as ye like, blame ye!"

"It'd save us trouble in the end, mebbe. Eh, pardy?"

"That's what!"

"In still plainer speech, you'd be only too glad of a half-excuse to murder me: is that the size of it, fellows?"

Kent Kerlin spoke boldly enough, yet his handsome face betrayed something of the real anxiety he could hardly help feeling.

The masks glanced at each other for a moment, then the larger man spoke in his turn:

"What ye playin' fer, critter? Ef ary durn foolishness—"

"I mean sober business, fellows," quickly cut in the prisoner, nodding his head to lend emphasis to his assertion. "And right here you have the kernel of it; how much do you ask to let this lady go free and unharmed to her home?"

The outlaws seemed taken by surprise, judging from their ejaculations and their actions; but Kent Kerlin spoke on:

"For myself I care mighty little. I'm a man, and expect to take a man's portion when it is measured out to me. But—a lady is different, and so—name your terms and conditions, gentlemen!"

"An' you'd pay 'em; is that the idee of it, stranger?"

"Yes he would—not!" skeptically cried the lesser knave.

"Try me and see," eagerly added the prisoner, trying to gesture with his hands, seemingly forgetting for the instant how thoroughly they had been bound. "Rather than harm should touch my—Miss Piercy, I'll give my last dollar on this wide earth!"

"Whar is them dollars?" asked the burly knave, extending a dingy paw as though eager to finger the wealth so spoken of. "Of course, you've got 'em all with ye right now?"

"No, but I'll pay you the hour we reach the Flat, and you can—"

"Augh! Rats!" disgustedly cried the smaller outlaw, making a gesture of rank scorn. "That's too durned thin, critter!"

"An' them dollars would turn to rope an' lead, you bet!"

"I swear to you, gentlemen—"

"Bah! Ye might as well spit in the face of a harrycane, stranger!" gruffly retorted the big outlaw. "You're lyin' from the jump, an' ef we was blame fools 'nough fer to swaller yer guff—"

"Which he'll swally lead in chunks afore that time comes!"

"But, I tell you—"

"No, ye don't, nuther," harshly. "Fer one thing, critter, we cain't make it come right that ye'd pay anything like the pile ye hint at—"

"Give me the chance to make my words good, then!" swiftly cut in Kerlin. "For myself I wouldn't offer a copper cent to the likes of—I mean, gentlemen, that I'll pay you down dollar for dollar, in cold cash, the very hour that sees Miss Piercy safe and sound in her father's arms once more!"

The road-agents looked at each other, then broke into a simultaneous chuckle, which fairly chilled the maiden's blood as she listened.

"It cain't be did, critter," declared the big fellow, after a bit. "Fer one thing, them arms is—waa, they couldn't hug even a honey-lump like yender gal; no they couldn't, now!"

"What do you mean by that, you scoundrel?"

For answer a heavy hand shot out and Kerlin staggered back like one half stunned by brutal blow.

"Set down, ye fool!" sternly commanded the road-agent, menacing him with clenched fist, other hand gripping pistol-butt. "You're too blamed lippy, anyhow! Set down or—"

"I've offered you fair ransom, you dogs!" fiercely cried the bound man, like one beside himself with honest indignation. "You refuse, and add insult to injury. Now—just one word more, you curs!"

"Although you may butcher me now, yet this ugly work of your vile gang shall not pass unpaid. I swear it; each and every one of you shall be hunted down and hanged like so many sleep-killing curs!"

With a quick leap the burly outlaw grappled with Kerlin, after a brief struggle flinging him back to sink down beside Eula Piercy.

Still giving no heed to himself, Kent pantingly assured the maiden that all must pan out for the best, bidding her cling to hope in spite of all.

"Our friends will not remain idle, and—surely kind heaven will not permit such foul wrong to—the devil!"

A cry of fierce surprise burst from Kerlin's lips, just then, for by the ruddy glow of yonder fire he saw one of the faces which had so far been hidden by mask of cloth; the face of the ruffian with whom he had held that brief and uneven struggle but a few moments earlier.

Evidently the fastening had broken or slipped away during that struggle, for the mask had fallen to earth, and the fellow seemed ignorant of the fact until a sharp oath and cry from his mate warned both captor and prisoner.

As Kerlin cried out, both knaves looked his way, and while the burly rascal hastily turned and caught up his disguise, the truth was recognized by them all.

"You, Ike Brooks?" as if involuntarily exclaimed Kent, as he caught a fair sight of that bearded, coarse-featured face.

"Now ye hev done it, durn ye fer a fool!" angrily growled the other outlaw, jerking forth a revolver and making as though he would use it without further delay.

Eula saw all this, and with true womanly courage, she impulsively threw herself between, as though she would shield that helpless man from death at her own expense.

"My darling—I thank you!" huskily cried Kent; but as quickly the maiden drew back, covering face with trembling hands, almost completely unnerved for the moment.

Still, her impulsive action was not wholly unrewarded, for the half-leveled weapon was lowered and the two road-agents stood near that fire and spoke in hasty whispers for fully a minute.

Then the big fellow, whom Kent Kerlin had called Ike Brooks in his surprise, flung the cloth mask upon the flames, and an instant later his companion in crime ostentatiously removed his own mask to follow suit.

"Mebbe ye know me, too, critter?" he asked, grimly, turning face more directly toward the prisoner. "Ef ye don't—shell I give ye my visitin' keerd, then, Kerlin?"

Kent did know him, and the name of Alf Dipperling fairly rose in his throat, but all at once, he had learned caution, and maintained a perfect silence.

Once more the brace of rascals squatted on their heels close to the fire, which was kept judiciously going by one or the other, and after another brief-lived interchange of guarded whispers, their tones were purposely raised until both man and maiden could hardly help hearing what passed between the knaves.

"Thar hain't no other way fer to fix it, from my p'int o' reason, pardy. An' the boss said fer to—didn't he?"

"Waal, he said fer to ketch the younker, dead or alive, but the gal wasn't to be hurt—on our lives!"

"Yit, ef it jest hed to be? Ef the fool boy was so hot on makin' a fight to a finish, an' the blame gal was to—didn't she jump right in atwixt ye when ye went to—eh?"

"An' I was turrible nigh-hand to pullin' trigger, fer a fact!"

"An' ef ye hed; an' ef she was to ketch the lead; an' ef we was to git so durn red-hot-all-over 'long o' his makin' us croak the gal, eh, pardy?"

Eula shivered and moaned as she caught the thinly veiled meaning which underlay these broken sentences. It surely seemed as though the brace of villains had already decided to commit a double murder as the surest method of concealing their own connection with the road-agents' band and their crimes in common.

But then Kent whispered softly, barely loud enough for her ears to catch his full meaning:

"Courage, love! Only a minute longer

and I'll be free to—I've almost got my hands free!"

A brief silence reigned over all, the road-agents apparently making up their minds as to the next move.

That was not long delayed, for Alf Dipperling grimly spoke as he drew a revolver, and after looking at the cylinder, handed it across to his mate:

"You kin turn the trick, pardy. Dead men tell no tales out o' school, n'r yit no gals don't—the only sure way for to clap a stopper on, too, I take it!"

"All right. I hain't a-keerin'," gruffly spoke the burly thug as he rose to his feet and moved toward the prisoners. "I'll shet off his wind so mighty sudden he won't hev no time fer to—"

"Don't spatter the gal, pardy!" mockingly cried out his comrade.

"All right. I won't do that. So—roust up hyar, critter!"

Brooks stooped to grasp a shoulder and drag the prisoner away, but as though by the touch of magic, those stout bonds dropped off Kerlin's arms, and with a savage cry he wrested that revolver from the outlaw's hand, hurling the fellow up and back even as the weapon began to speak.

Brooks staggered back, blindly flinging up his arms and spinning nearly around before falling, then sinking down upon his face, convulsively struggling, yet surely past the power of working further evil.

Alf Dipperling seemed fairly dumfounded by this sudden change of affairs, and he scarcely had time to scramble to his feet beside the fire, ere Kent Kerlin was coming his way, shooting at each forward stride.

At such short range it seemed impossible for one to miss the size of a man, and the second knave fell to earth before he could fairly draw a revolver, much less make effective use of it.

Poor Eula, scared fairly out of her wits by this tragic scene, added to all that had gone before, was cowering by that bowlder, panting faintly and too terror-stricken for articulate cry.

Only pausing long enough to snatch up the pistol which fell from the hand of his second victim, Kerlin turned back and caught the maiden up in his muscular arms, carrying her over to where the horse was still on lariat, then hurriedly speaking in soothing terms:

"All's well, my darling! I had to—just had to do it, don't you see? And now—please heaven I'll take you back home, after all!"

As quickly as the somewhat startled animal could be brought under control, Kent swung Eula into the replaced saddle, then lightly vaulted up behind her, riding briskly away from that spot of terrors.

For nearly half an hour he pressed on without halting, almost without speech, evidently deeming it wisest to permit that first awful shock to partly pass away.

Then, little by little, he calmed the maiden's natural fears, showing her how surely they both must have perished had he been less fortunate in slipping his bonds.

Then he ventured again to speak of his intense adoration for the maiden in whose behalf he had steeped his hands in human gore; but Eula shrunk away so sharply that he choked back his words for the present.

But with them Kent Kerlin was forced to swallow an oath as well!

CHAPTER XI.

KENT KERLIN'S PROUD HOUR.

Although as a rule she kept pretty late hours, Frisky Flat was by no means a "slug-a-bed," yet the town was astir at an even earlier hour than usual the day following that eventful hold-up.

Verne Velvet was one of those earliest astir, although he had only found bed at a very late hour; the most of his time being given to Mr. Piercy, doing all that man might to soothe and comfort the nearly crazed father.

Among other things the Sport in Velvet promised to take the trail by the first rays of dawn, and never give over the hunt until Eula had been rescued if recaptured, found if merely gone astray in the mountains.

Having done all that lay in his power, then, Velvet sought a hotel and bed, lying down for his "forty winks," not knowing how long a time might elapse ere another such opportunity would come his way.

In this good work the handsome stranger had been ably seconded by Roger Kerlin, father to one of the couple on whose account such deep anxiety was being experienced, and almost the first person Verne met the next morning was this same junior member of the mining and banking firm of Piercy & Kerlin.

In a marvelously brief space of time the town itself seemed turning to life, and armed men hurried here and there, one and all making preparations for the campaign, more than one loudly vowing to stay there while a single one of that dastardly outfit drew breath of life.

Everything went to show an earnest, whole-hearted job of it, but the majority of those volunteering so eagerly were fated to meet with disappointment, so far as their winning proud laurels was concerned.

With all haste that could be made, the little army was not quite ready to get under headway, when a sharp-eyed fellow gave a little cry, pointing hand as he exclaimed:

"Look at that, will ye? Ef it isn't—Kent Kerlin, or I'm a howlin' liar from 'way up the crick!"

"Kent Kerlin and—whooray!"

"The girl, too, by glory!"

For yonder, headed direct for town and coming at a brisk trot, was a doubly laden horse, one of whose riders was a woman, the other—yes!

A clear, ringing cheer, coupled with a flourishing hand and arm, put all further doubts aside, and recognizing his son, Roger Kerlin gave an odd, husky sound, then sprung forward with a lusty cheer which found an echo in a score of throats.

That double recognition spread as swiftly as did the cheer which echoed shout of proud father, and amid the wildest confusion the little army rushed forward to meet the fugitives, fairly overwhelming both with glad congratulations, joyous shouts, and burning questions.

It surely must have been a proud moment for Kent Kerlin, and his darkly handsome face was warmly flushed as one hand tightly gripped that of father, his other member uplifted in almost impatient expostulation.

"Whar is the durn critters, boy?"

"How did ye give 'em the dirty shake, then?"

"Show us where we can find them, Kent, and if we don't have a holy jamboree—"

"Wait—wait, the pile o' ye!" sharply cried the hero, dropping hand of father to catch rein and then send the horse forward by keen thrust of heel. "All in good time, friends, but for now—make way for a lady there!"

"The boy's right!" cried Roger Kerlin, falling aside and carrying others with him, thanks to the pair of unusually sturdy arms and broad shoulders with which he had been gifted by nature at birth. "There's poor Piercy half crazy, and—his duty lies there, first of all!"

And so it came to pass that Kent Kerlin rode through that enthusiastic crowd without stopping to give a full account of his heroic deeds, making the best of his way over to where the Piercy residence stood on the outskirts of town, and fairly reaching the threshold itself before their coming was discovered by the aged banker.

With an almost hysterical scream Eula slipped from saddle to earth, then sprung into the arms of her eager parent, laughing and sobbing, hands clasped around his neck as though death itself should never part them more.

Kent Kerlin was a bit too slow to aid that happy meeting further, and though he likewise slipped to ground and extended a congratulatory hand, neither father nor daughter gave him heed, and as his hand slowly sunk, his smile faded until 'twas but the sickly shadow of a grin.

Lusty cheers broke from such of the citizens as witnessed that glad reunion, and this seemed to startle both father and daughter.

Nathan Piercy tried to speak his thanks, but his voice failed him and he hurried within the house, closing door behind himself and child, leaving the hero of the hour looking anything but happy.

Roger Kerlin had borne the young couple company to the place, and now his strong hand gripped that of his son, and his voice offered such consolation as could be given a dejected lover.

"The poor old fellow is nearly crazy, lad, and don't know just what he's doing; whether he's on head or on heels. So—it'll all be right as soon's he's had time to think it over, lad!"

"It's all right now," declared Kent, putting the best possible face upon it, forcing a smile as, with bridle-reins over an arm, he turned and moved back toward the busy part of town.

Having nothing better to do, and with burning curiosity still unsated, the crowd bore father and son company, some cheering wildly, others spending breath just as freely but to better purpose, asking for a full account of the adventure.

As any fairly modest man naturally would Kent Kerlin rather shrunk from blowing his own trumpet, but so pressing grew those friendly demands that Roger Kerlin spoke in lowered tones:

"It's the shortest way out of it, lad. Better tell them just how it came about; you can cut it short, you know."

Verne Velvet, still upon his good white steed, formed one of that escort, although his voice was not lifted to aid in singing the victor's paeans, powerful though his interest in that whole affair surely was.

Rightly or wrongly, he felt a steadily growing skepticism as to the real merits of this thrilling rescue, and kept along with the company in hopes of having his doubts fully resolved one way or the other.

Seeing that he could not well escape in silence, Kent Kerlin made the best of matters, lifting a hand by way of commanding silence and attention, then at once plunging into the midst of his account.

Briefly, tersely, he told of that hold-up and of the events which followed so rapidly, making the audience see how sorely he was frightened for the welfare of Miss Piercy.

He used but few words in describing how he contrived that bold breakaway, giving fewer still to that dash through defile and out into the broken country where darkness helped to send them utterly astray.

Then, reluctantly, as a brave man might, he told the rest; of their surprise and capture; the brutal conduct of the two road-agents, and of how they tortured the maiden by vague assertions concerning her father and his horrible fate; of the tragic scene which ended in their final escape, thanks to an overruling Providence!

A half-smothered cheer greeted the hero as he briefly alluded to that double killing in self-defense, then some one asked who the outlaws proved to be.

Instead of answering frankly, Kent Kerlin hesitated, then went hastily on without giving names or other means of identification.

Right or wrong, Verne Velvet set this down in his mind as another suspicious point to be remembered, keenly studying the young man further.

When that narrative was brought to an abrupt end, one of the citizens who had from the outset made himself conspicuous for enthusiasm, whirled hat over head to send it high in air as he

gave a lusty cheer, then speaking in stentorian tones:

"Whooray fer the younker! Whooray fer the gal! An'—all in a heap, ye gallants, now! Whooray fer all two both on 'em, tied up in a heap ferever amen!"

"Steady, Curly Rebb!" cried Kent Kerlin, sternly, at this outburst.

"Durn the odds, boss, so long's it ought to be jest so," vigorously persisted the athletic fellow. "Whooray fer the fittin' match! An' I makes a motion as we hev a he-ole weddin' afore this yer week's out!"

"Stop, all!" again cried Kerlin, right hand going up to enforce that command; but silence only came after an enthusiastic cheer went up from the crowd there assembled, the large majority of which certainly seemed in favor of such a finale.

Then the young man spoke, with flushed cheeks and eyes aglow.

"All this comes out against my will and words, gentlemen, I call on you to bear witness! But, since such words have been uttered, I can't help adding just this much on my own account:

"I love Miss Piercy as woman was never worshipped by man before! I could ask no greater gift on earth or in heaven than just that, the proud privilege of calling her—my wife!"

Another enthusiastic cheer greeted this speech, and almost before those echoes died away, a clear, oddly-sounding voice made itself heard, pronouncing the words:

"How much did you pay those two poor devils for letting themselves be butchered, Kent Kerlin?"

If a thunderbolt had touched earth right in their midst, it could hardly have caused greater amazement, and surely less fierce anger to some.

Kent recoiled involuntarily, turning pale and with hand falling to butt of pistol. His father, to the contrary, strode to the front with weapon drawn and strained voice, demanding:

"Who spoke? Where is the infernal coward who would—show up, I say, you currish whelp!"

All was stir and bustle, just then, men swaying to and fro as they excitedly sought for that rash speaker; but sought in vain.

Only one in all that gathering knew from whence the strange query came, and he cared not to tell, just then.

But inwardly Verne Velvet was making another note; surely there was more of guilt than of innocent indignation in the pale face of the gallant hero of the hour.

Satisfied with what he had seen and heard, so far, the Sport in Velvet permitted his steed to move little by little away from the centre of excitement, but ere he could safely beat a full retreat, Kent Kerlin rallied from that shock, and in fierce tones denounced the coward who dared not back up his base insinuations.

"Step to the front if you are not all cur! Or—I'll give any man a cool hundred dollars just to point me out the scoundrel who spoke those infamous words!"

"And I'll double the reward out of my own pocket," sternly added the banker, fully as much in earnest as his son.

A faint smile crept into the handsome face of the Dude in Velvet as he slowly rode away from the half-bewildered crowd and as he won fairly clear, heading toward the Piercy mansion, low murmurings shaped themselves into words:

"Guilty or not guilty? If the last, then Kent Kerlin has fair grounds for suing that face of his for slander, anyway!"

Still pondering over this curiously tangled affair, the Sport in Velvet rode onward at a slow pace, seemingly with no particular destination in view, yet all the time heading toward the roof-tree which gave shelter to father and daughter, Nathan and Eula Piercy.

Drawing rein when nigh that home, the Sport gazed intently at the building

for a full minute, then muttering to himself:

"Shall I or not? Is it worth the effort? Can I hope to learn anything through questioning the girl? Or—all right!"

Having made up his mind as to his line of action, Verne Velvet tied his horse, then strode briskly to the house, tapping lightly at the door.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW A BULLY WAS BAITED.

Although by no means assured of a welcome, or even of admission to the house, which had been closed to all others, the stranger in Frisky Flat was not only admitted, but given a welcome cordial enough to bring a flush of embarrassment even to his trained cheek.

Not content with giving thanks in his own person, Nathan Piercy bade Eula do likewise, vowing that to this noble stranger his life was surely owing.

The whole story of that mad flight down the Devil's Dump was repeated, and just how the white-horse rider risked his own life to save that of complete strangers.

In vain Verne Velvet disclaimed the honors thrust upon him. The facts spoke for themselves, and knowing so well what a perilous passage that surely was, both father and daughter found it a difficult matter to fitly express their gratitude.

Although embarrassing, particularly when Eula's warm hands clasped and pressed his so earnestly, when Eula's big blue eyes grew moister with intense emotion as they looked up into his brown orbs, still there was a certain degree of pleasure and pride in it all, if the whole truth must be told.

Having made as light of his daring exploit as he well could without laying himself open to the charge of mock modesty, Verne Velvet deftly turned the subject, and gradually led Eula into giving an account of her own adventures after the bold dash for freedom made by Kent Kerlin.

It was a difficult story to tell; it was hard to say enough, without saying too much for ears of stranger to drink in; but Eula had already told the story to her father, and Mr. Piercy was thus enabled to help her out whenever she grew confused.

Here and there Verne Velvet put in a wary question, taking care not to too openly expose his real animus, but doing all he could to settle the ugly doubts he had held from the first concerning the animus of that thrilling exploit.

His success was by no means complete, for Eula, even if she had caught name of the unmasked outlaw, could not repeat it now, nor could she remember ever having laid eyes upon one or other of those two bold knaves before that night.

Deftly explaining away both visit and questions with the plea of a desire to collect all possible proofs against the evil-doers, and thus the more surely bring about their just reward, Verne Velvet took his departure, fairly well satisfied with his call.

Remounting, Verne Velvet rode away in the direction of his hotel, feeling fairly well assured that the campaign as planned would be postponed, if not called off altogether.

If such should prove to be the case, he certainly would not raise any serious objections, for other business of even greater importance had called him to Frisky Flat, and he felt that he would gather more profit in sticking to that original line than in hunting road-agents just for the fun of it.

But, the excitement caused by hold-up and following events was not to die away so suddenly, and, as the Sport drew near his hotel, he saw a fair-sized crowd gathered in the street, prominent among their number being the good-looking fellow called Curly Rebb by Kent Kerlin.

Without the faintest expectation of fresh trouble, the Sport in Velvet rode leisurely toward that crowd, but at his approach the loud tones of the dashing bully made themselves offensively prominent.

"Look at that blamed dude, will ye, boys? He's the monkey who hollered out to Kerlin over yender! He's the dirty-smellin' sneak who hain't got the sand fer to back up his nasty lies—he is!"

By this time the well-attired horseman was only a few feet distant, and a bland smile lightened up his handsome visage as if listening to a compliment of the neatest description.

Yet, only an instant later there sounded a clear voice:

"You're a liar by the watch, Curly Rebb!"

A voice which apparently came from—whither? Certainly not from those smiling lips, for Curly Rebb whirled as on a pivot, giving a cry of rage as hand dropped to revolver butt.

But, where was the owner of that voice?

"Who—whar—who said that, durn ye all?" spluttered the bully, murder in heart as it surely was in eyes.

But, now, as once before, the entire company was taken aback and had not even the shadow of an idea as to the speaker.

How should they, with nothing further to judge from than an empty sound, and blindly misled by the action of the bully himself.

Of course, many of those present had heard about ventriloquism, and if questioned on that particular point could doubtless have given a fairly accurate description of the art itself; but, nothing was here to direct their thoughts aright, and so the game went merrily on.

For, even as Curly Rebb whirled to splutter that savage demand, a mocking voice made itself heard in laughter; now here, now there, shifting about as often as that maddened man turned in hot defiance.

"Look at him, will you!" a different voice cried. "Spinning around like any other cur snapping at its own tail!"

"Bully boy skeered of his own shadow!"

"Ole man's drunk ag'in!"

"Fan me with a brick, honey!"

From all sides came these quips and quirks, but ever from his rear as the baited bully turned in savage rage, growing more and more bewildered with the passage of each moment.

And still unsuspecting the actual facts of the case, but merely catching the spirit of deviltry which seemed afloat, certain members of that gathering who had scanty cause for loving or respecting Curly Rebb, took up the cue, adding more to the merriment and certainly to the fury of that tough of the camps.

Verne Velvet was more than content that such should be the case, for his peculiar accomplishment had served him well thus far, and he had an idea that it would be of even greater service in days to come, provided he could keep his secret.

It would be much easier, now, since a number of citizens had chipped in along that same line. If questions were asked after this bit of sport grew old, who was to say just where or by whom that merry baiting was begun?

And so, believing as he did that Curly Rebb was a rascal born and a most fitting subject for sport of this description, Verne Velvet turned sideways in the saddle, giving himself up to the enjoyment of the hour.

For a few minutes the baited bully was kept in constant motion, no sooner delivering a defiance in one direction than another voice from his rear caused a whirl that way.

That the fellow was no coward was proved by his standing his ground where all seemed against him. One lacking sturdy nerve would have slunk away.

For, even with eyes rage-blinded as his were, Curly Rebb could not avoid recognizing the ugly truth; the crowd was against him, now, no matter what their sentiments may have been ere the coming upon the scene of the Dude in Velvet.

Although he as yet failed to recognize voice, altered as those were on purpose, Curly could see broad grins whichever way he turned, and knew the whole assembly was hugely enjoying his awkward dilemma.

"I kin lick the dog as barks ahind my back!" he fairly howled as he once more failed to detect author of biting quip. "I'm a man; you're not even the shadder of a man, durn 'an' double-durn ye all over!"

"Augh! Go soak yer cabeza, bully!" "Don't! Would ye advise suicide? Water'd kill him too mighty quick for any sort o' use!"

This from the throat of Verne Velvet, who wished to keep up that crazy dance for a bit longer.

Again the maddened fellow howled and roared forth defiance, turning here and there, seeking in vain for speaking lips, although the laughing ones there seemed no end.

And thus given a fillip, the jokers carried on the mad play, growing less cautious as the fun waxed more furious, and so fetching matters to a climax before the sport grew stale.

Until now the burly thug had been easily fooled, almost as much through his own savage rage which half-blinded eyes as because those who were making a bait of him used so much caution.

But now the bully caught one of the crowd in the very act, and with a savage roar of mad hatred made a plunge that way, on mischief bent.

That careless taunter proved to be a man of middle age, rather under than over the average as to size and weight.

The Sport in Velvet was "keeping tab" from his seat upon the white horse, that elevation giving him an advantage which he would not have held when on the lower level.

He easily spotted each speaker in turn, and now he knew the time had come for him to take prompt action.

"Ill smash ye clean into the airth, Zack Eads!" hoarsely roared Curly Rebb as he began that rush; only to have a clear voice come from his rear, saying contemptuously:

"Oh, strike a man near your own size, you overgrown bully!"

Almost without thinking the thug whirled about, giving a hoarse cry as he surely spotted the speaker; none other than the "cussed dude," for whom he held an intense aversion already.

At last he had found a fitting example, and checking himself by an effort of will, the bully grinned viciously, brushing a hand over brows to dash away the great beads of sweat which his furious exertions and mad rage had gathered there.

"You—you, is it?"

"If you mean by that did I speak; yes," coolly answered the Sport.

"An' you called me—what?"

"An overgrown bully. Shall I tell you what else you are, Curly Rebb?"

"Look out for him, stranger!" cried one of the citizens in friendly warning. "He's p'izen when he comes on the jump, Curly is!"

Rebb showed teeth in a vicious grin, but merely took a step or two nearer the horseman, speaking in his hoarse, grating tones:

"Who be ye, anyway? What air ye, critter?"

"A white man and a gentleman. What are you, Dirty Dark?"

"Waal, you smellin' squirt," slowly answered the bully as he stepped a bit nearer that apparently careless adversary, fingers closing until his big paws formed huge knots of bone and sinew. "It's easy fer to say what I'm gwine to be ef

you don't—git down off'n that hoss an' eat dirt, you cussed dude!"

"Thanks, but, really, I'm not in the least hungry," blandly retorted the Sport in Velvet, making no change in his position, awkward though that might be in case of an actual assault.

"Git down, an' lick dirt, I tell ye, critter!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yas!"

"Do you really mean all that, Curly Rebb?"

"An' you've got to do jest that or—eat dirt, I say, or I'll mop this hull section up with ye, critter!"

"I always thought you were a liar, Curly, and now I know it."

With savage oath and howl combined, the bully leaped forward to grasp the careless Sport, feeling sure he had him foul; but mortal man never made a ranker mistake than did Curly Rebb right then and there.

One foot in patent leather shot out and upward, striking the bully under the chin, lifting him clear of the earth and sending him headlong!

CHAPTER XIII.

A LITTLE SPORT ON THE SIDE.

It seemed hardly possible for an effort which betrayed no greater exertion to produce such an effect, but, muscular man though he was, and in goodly measure on his guard, Curly Rebb shot backward as though smote by a battering-ram.

With a deft turn of ankle which was well calculated to save his foot, Verne Velvet struck the bully under the chin and upon throat so surely that nothing further was called for.

Then, with graceful agility the Dude in Velvet flipped his legs around to slip lightly off the animal, facing the startled crowd an instant later with two armed hands showing above the back of the white steed, and his clear tones ringing out in cool warning:

"Touch lightly, gentlemen all! I'm a man of peace when the sign's right, yet I can fight when I have to, and then—every pound of my make-up counts for a ton!"

Cool in voice, smiling of face, but with a dangerous devil glowing in those nut-brown eyes, the Sport in Velvet stood at bay, body shielded by body of horse, a revolver gripped in each hand, the muzzles of which were now moving easily to and fro, as though he who wielded them felt able to cover a little army at one and the same time.

Cries of wonder and a stray oath or two broke from the crowd, recently so full of jest and boisterous mirth, but now more hands than one instinctively fell upon butt of pistol or hilt of knife, and being a stranger within the gates, Verne Velvet had no means of knowing just how many would prove his enemies or how soon he might be called upon to hold his own against overwhelming odds.

These doubts caused him to turn to bay so swiftly, and to give warning as soon as tongue could shape the syllables.

"Man to man is fair play the world over, gentlemen!" he cried, as that half-anticipated rush failed to start at once. "It was a case of get there or get left, and Curly took a tumble—just as easy!"

"Kicked his cabeza plum' off!"

"Broke his neck for rocks!"

"An' him never a show fer to—"

"Easy, there!" sternly cut in the Sport, deeming it only wise to nip in the bud any such dangerous thrust. "Curly came at me with all eyes open, and you—if you're true friend of his, why don't you lend him a helping hand?"

"Ef he's killed—"

"Then I'll gladly take you on in his place, my pretty lad. Until that is proven—do dead men grunt and snore like that?"

There was a faint echo of relief in these words, for no one knew better than

Verne Velvet what a heavy shock that blustering bully had received, and how easy it would be to account for a broken neck as a sequence to that deftly-delivered kick.

But he was right; Curly Rebb was already giving signs of rallying, and it may be doubted whether he had entirely lost consciousness.

The group had instinctively scattered when there seemed a certainty of the two men coming together in a finish fight, but they had just as naturally surged back again after Curly took his tumble, and now were gathered quite thickly about the disabled gladiator.

With grunt and gasping groan, Curly strove to rise, shaking head and striving to swallow that painfully awkward lump in his throat as right hand fumbled at belt for pistol.

"Who hit—whar is the cussed—I'll make a sand-sifter out o' the—augh!"

With almost ludicrous celerity the spectators scattered from the struggling man, ducking head and casting anxious looks over shoulder in mortal fear lest blind firing claim wholly innocent targets.

But it was not such an easy matter to wholly recover from that shock, and Curly Rebb was upon his feet and still fumbling for his gun when sufficient sight returned to his watery eyes to convince him that still worse might lie ahead.

"Steady, Curly!" came the warning cry from lips of Velvet Sport, and thus directed, Rebb could see how surely he was covered. "I've got you lined, old man, and if I have to bust a cap—good-by!"

A hoarse, inarticulate growl broke from the bully's lips as he stood irresolute, still far from firm upon his legs.

Others saw this, and feeling that he was overmatched just then, one of their number was bold enough to enter a swift protest:

"Don't shoot a cripple! Give him a show; dollars to dimes Curly kin down ye all over with anything like a show!"

Evidently this smooth stranger was "up to snuff," for he never turned eyes in that direction, nor suffered the drop to deviate by so much as breadth of hair, speaking coldly:

"Hold your ease, Curly, my pretty fellow! I hate to waste good shells on small game, but if an animal of your build and stripes will run in my road, with tail dampened and ready for business—how can I help it?"

By this time Rebb could fairly realize how fatally he was handicapped just now, and as many a better man would have done in like case, he lacked the daring to make the dash he at first intended.

Doubtless the words of friend were still echoing in his ears, for he huskily spoke to that same tune:

"Gi' me a show—gi' me anyways lafe a show, critter!"

"Ah, come, now, Curly! Haven't I been making a holy show of you all along?" mocked the Velvet Sport, lightly. "Or, rather, haven't you been a snow all by your lonesome?"

"Gi' me a show—gi' me a show, darn ye, critter!"

Clearly Rebb was in poor condition for argument as yet, although he was gaining wind and wit by degrees, growing more dangerous the longer that respite lasted.

Verne Velvet could not well avoid realizing all this, but he hardly had any option.

In spite of the fact that, only a short time gone by, this burly bully had been made a laughing stock by his fellow-citizens, it was easy to be seen that Curly had the large majority of that assembly with him, so far as sympathy went.

Keen enough to realize all this, the stranger was too shrewd to make a still worse mistake. Yet he was hardly prepared to beat an actual retreat, and so admit himself worsted by such an adversary as this.

Granting all this, it was by no means a difficult matter for the Velvet Dude

to come to a conclusion, and now he spoke coolly, sharply:

"All right, my sweet-scented beauty. A show you shall have, even if it does turn out to be a circus, with Curly Rebb for chief clown!"

"I kin clown you ef I ever—gi' me show, blame ye!"

"So be it Curly! I'm always open to fun and frolic, and just now I feel as gay as a two-year-old on fresh oats! A show? All right, my fancy pug, and if I don't prove myself your master from start to finish, in any way, shape or manner, at any sport from A to Izard, then—you can take my last week's socks for a cud of chewing gum!"

One would scarcely look for such glib chaff from so polished a dandy, but that merely added to the novelty of it all, and helped the cool stranger far more than if he had stood upon his dignity all the way through.

Only Curly Rebb grew more vicious as he stood that wordy pelting, and with a show of teeth the burly knave made retort:

"I kin eat ye up alive, critter!"

Verne Velvet laughed, soapy, purring; y, more like a woman than a fire-eater.

"As Paddy said anent a better and smarter man than either you or me, Curly; faith, sor, an' av ye did that, ye'd hev a divil av a solight more brains in yer belly than yez iver hild in the hid av yez, begorra!"

A burst of laughter at this quotation, coming so apt and true to facts, told the Velvet Sport he was gaining fresh friends; and now feeling fairly assured that he would have fair play all around, he spoke with a more business-like air:

"But, joking aside, Curly, I am your master from start to finish, and if you insist on my proving just that much—"

"Put down yer guns, then! Gi' me hafe a show, cuss ye!"

One keen glance around to note what those faces contained, then the dandified sport once more electrified the crowd.

"All right, Curly. Anything to humor an overgrown baby who hasn't any more sense than to cry for the full moon. Now—you pretend that my guns are the odds against you? Well—how does this strike you, gallant hero of the hour?"

So far the Dude in Velvet had remained back of his horse, guns resting lightly across the emptied saddle, but now Verne stepped briskly around the animal, lowering hammers and slipping pistols into coat-pockets, then slipping deftly out of that garment, which he tossed lightly upon the saddle, then fairly faced his enemy with careless grace.

"You say my guns handicapped you, and without them you could just naturally eat me up? Now—make good your words, or crawl into your hole like the skunk I've branded you, Curly!"

As by instinct the bully felt for a revolver, but a warning cry broke from a number of his friends, and knowing from past experience that any foul play after this action would recoil upon his own head, the big fellow gave a hoarse howl of vicious exultation, stripping off his belt of arms as he spoke:

"Ef I don't—I'll jest chaw ye up fer a spit through a knot hole! I'll jest—oh, blame you fer a—"

Tossing the weapons aside in reckless haste, Curly gathered himself as if for a savage rush, when Verne Velvet flung up a hand and checked him with swift speech:

"Easy, Rebb! I'm doing all this just to satisfy your longing, and so—just how would you rather have it, bully?"

"Durn the odds, jest so I—hev you!"

With indescribable ferocity came those snarling words, and like one who is willing to risk all upon a single test, the bully made his rush, striking out with both hands as he came.

But with all his apparent carelessness, Verne Velvet was on the keen alert, and stepping nimbly aside, ducking head and lifting one arm to ward off the blow which was coming, he rose again just behind the furious thug, laughing aloud as

he leaned forward to strike twice at almost the same instant.

Sharp as crack of whip those blows echoed, but they were given with open hand upon bristly cheeks, stinging like touch of fire and drawing another vicious oath from the astounded thug.

Whirling swiftly, Curly Rebb repeated his rush and his blows, the personification of savage hatred and lust for blood.

Again the Sport in Velvet proved himself an adept, but this time with fists instead of open palms, striking swift and sharply, those white knuckles cutting through the skin and flesh much as they might have done with metal "dusters" on.

In bewildering succession fell those blows, now coming straight from the shoulder, then from a bit above, a trifle below, or after a masterly duck and dodge to rise again just without that clumsy guard.

It was only another instance of skill against strength, science against muscle, keen brain against sluggish wit; and hardly one of those who looked on with more or less eagerness but felt assured that the dandified stranger held this burly bully entirely at his mercy.

"You've called me out of my name once too often, Curly," declared Velvet, as the baffled bully poured forth curses and foul epithets. "You shall not have fair excuse to do so again, for—right here you have my name, written in red, each and every letter of which is warranted not to fade under a week at the lowest calculation!"

Swiftly came these words, but even more rapidly that "signature" was written by steel-like knuckles, each blow sending that head back a few inches, followed by others so rapidly that the sounds blended into one muffled roll.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER LESSON FOR CURLY REBB.

It was a marvelous exhibition from a pugilistic standpoint, yet all could see that the Sport in Velvet was merely toying with his man, even while each blow left ugly impress behind it.

Scarcely one of those looking on but felt that Verne Velvet could put on the finishing touch whenever he felt inclined; for those cuts proved plainly enough that he was an unusually hard hitter, and all could see that he landed at will.

But instead of "knocking out" his adversary, the Sport sprang lightly back, hands dropping to hips as he stood at ease for a moment, viewing his handiwork, then speaking in mocking tones:

"Oh, Curly! Go send me something like a man to take your place! You make me tired trying to—"

"Keerful, Sport! thar's a critter jumpin' ye from ahind!"

Again that strange voice rung forth, sharply, and like one fearing to be taken foul, Verne Velvet turned partly around with an exclamation of angry surprise, thus exposing himself to the enemy in front.

In spite of the terrible punishment he had already received, Curly Rebb was fiercer than ever, and still far from owning himself beaten.

He hated this dandified stranger far worse now than he hated aught else beneath the wide canopy, and though half blind from those stinging blows, he still had eyesight sufficient to see this opening as it was offered him.

Without stopping to see who or why that chance came his way, Curly made his rush savagely, panting as he flung both arms around that trim-built stranger:

"I've got ye—now I hev got ye!"

At no time since that fight began, did the difference in size and bulk "loom up" so strongly; and taken off guard as the Sport surely was, there seemed but one ending possible.

"Curly'll smash him like—will ye look at that, now!"

For the Sport in Velvet slid about in that savage clutch ere those muscular

arms could fairly contract, and was now face to face, breast to breast, on equal footing since one sinewy arm likewise slipped outside of that living circle, to secure a hold to the full as advantageous.

Instead of showing either surprise or chagrin at being thus caught, the Ventriloquist Sport laughed shrilly in the bully's face, then spoke:

"And what do ye think you're going to do with me, Curly?"

"Kill ye! Break yer cussed neck an'—I'll kill ye like I would a sneakin' houn'-pup which—"

The bully was unable to complete that savage threat, for he found himself literally with his arms full, and even more than full of skilled force, against which he struggled desperately.

It had seemed so easy, if only he might once come to a close with that dandified stranger!

He could crush in that swelling chest. He could splinter those ribs and twist that spine asunder as though—

So easy then, so difficult now!

Madly the rivals wrestled, swaying from side to side as they turned about and reeled forward, only to come back again the next moment.

Too furiously for curse or mock, too savagely for more than panting breath or laboring gasp. Until—

One of Curly Rebb's feet slipped for a second, but that was long enough to seal his fate with such a skillful adversary, and the next moment he toppled over with a choking cry, was fairly wrenched off both feet to be turned bodily in air with one of those slender but steel-like arms as a pivot, then hurled headlong to the hard ground, Verne Velvet adding his own weight to that fall.

An ugly sound—sounds such as might well betoken a broken vertebra—and then an agile figure sprung clear of the little cloud of dust, and ere the startled witnesses could fairly cipher out just what had taken place, Verne Velvet was beside his horse, slipping arms into coat and then lifting hands, each of which grasped butt of revolver.

Those weapons were not fairly raised to a level, but forefingers were inside the guards, and a mere contraction of muscles would cause the pointed hammers to rise, trip and fall in deadly earnest.

It was the action of a man who has been thoroughly trained to guard against surprise from all quarters, but the Dude in Velvet was only giving his attention to those erect, not even wasting a stray glance upon his prostrate antagonist.

"Have I played white, gentlemen?" he asked, voice steady and cool, as though its owner had not just ceased from most violent exercise. "Can any one of you say that black is the white of my eye?"

"White as white, or I'm a liar!" fairly howled Tommy Triplock, for the moment actually forgetting his recent melancholy loss in wild admiration for this phenomenon in velvet and fine linen.

"Thanks, all!" and the Sport bowed with charming grace, replacing his weapons like one who feels no further need of their backing. "Then, of course, there's no need of this little racket spreading to others."

"'Twas a fair deal, easy enough," declared another citizen, but with a doubting shake of the head as he looked toward the other wrestler. "But if Curly hasn't—"

"Busted his neck all to thunder!" spluttered another witness.

"Look to the fellow, you, if he has any friends in this crowd," the Dude in Velvet coldly spoke, with a bit of a frown marking his handsome face as he looked toward the fallen athlete. "If he happens to be dead just give him a decent planting and send the bill to me. If still living—well, I'll pay for the rope to hang him, in the end!"

No doubt this speech sounded heartless to many of those within earshot, and

possibly lost the stranger a friend or two whose lack he might have cause to regret in the near future.

But Verne Velvet felt fairly confident that Curly Rebb was far from being a dead man, and he certainly was the best judge, next to the doubly defeated bully himself.

Several citizens fell to work over the fellow, straightening him out as the first step, then carefully and apprehensively feeling of that thick neck, fearing to lift the heavy head until later on.

This time there was no doubt about the bully being knocked entirely out, or that he would be unfit for further fighting for a few hours, at least; but Verne Velvet only waited until those assistants were fully convinced that Rebb's neck was intact, and that he was merely stunned by that heavy fall.

Springing lightly into the saddle of his white horse, looking but slightly ruffled and not at all the worse for that brisk passage of arms, the stranger spoke in clear, crisp tones:

"If I should be wanted for anything further, anything particular, that is, I can be found at the hotel yonder. And so—good-day to you one and all, gentlemen!"

Like one who had not a care or trouble in the world, Verne Velvet rode over to the stable attached to the hotel at which he had secured a room the night before.

Here he attended to the noble white in person, supplying all its wants and answering its caresses in kind. There was true affection existing between master and servant, and neither was ashamed to exhibit that same, either.

Having performed what he held to be both duty and pleasure, Velvet left the stable and proceeded to the hotel, where he found himself looked upon as little less than a perambulating show, not a little to his discomfort and even disgust.

Taking time only to select a few cigars, the best the hotel bar afforded, Velvet turned away, taking the key to his chamber with him.

He passed from the office to the stairs, going to the upper story and entering his room, closing and locking the door after himself.

A bare, comfortless apartment, as a matter of course; just such another as may be found in any hotel in hardly civilized regions, with a hard, narrow bed, the furnishings of which need hardly be mentioned; a stained pine stand, with cracked pitcher and basin of dingy tin; a single wooden-backed and bottomed chair, with a few nails driven into wooden partition to serve as wardrobe.

But Verne Velvet never bothered his head about these rude surroundings, having sought this privacy with very different intentions.

Removing his coat and placing it, together with his pistols, upon the chair, which he drew close to the head of the bed, he doubled the lank pillow as a better rest for his head, then lay on the broad of his back, hands clasped above his head and eyes staring almost dreamily at the weather-stained ceiling above.

The Sport had come up here where he could count upon quiet with a fair degree of certainty, purely because he wished to do some close thinking; and after a bit he permitted at least a portion of those mental exercises to escape by way of his lips.

"What manner of game are they trying to play, anyway? Game it is, for certain, but—of just what description?"

"Take that hold-up, for instance; was there anything below the surface? Was it purely and solely a hold-up for coin? Or—was it more?"

There lay the sticking point!

When looked at from the surface alone, it seemed nothing out of the ordinary run of such exploits; a desperate attempt by desperate men who were ready to descend to any depths through lust for wealth.

"But the rest of it?" mused the Sport

in Velvet, those brown eyes beginning to glow with a vivid fire, which certainly was the opposite of dreamy. "The unexampled ferocity of the actors! To doom all hands to a break-neck dash down the Devil's Dump—like that!"

"Was that merely because Piercy happened to shoot one of the villains by accident? If so, why include the others? If not—was it to surely dispose of all witnesses?"

"And yet, how could that be when young Kerlin was alive and free, taking the girl with him? And—what made him dodge the question when asked if he could recognize either of the fellows he—did he kill them, though?"

Right there was one of the points which worried the Velvet Sport the most; for, if that double killing was true, then his other beliefs must undergo a radical change to suit.

"Unless—was it a put-up job all around? Were those rascals playing their part all right, only to get the double-cross from Kerlin when he jumped up to play hero?"

Another pause, and other spell of deep musing, during which the Sport strove to disentangle those threads from start to finish, but with hardly the degree of success for which he hoped.

The puzzle seemed to grow all the deeper the more it was probed, and the right solution harder still to find the keener 'twas looked for.

"Pure quill, or a put-up job; which? Was Roger Kerlin in the game, playing from under cover? Was it merely a stroke for boodle, or was it—a devilish scheme to croak Nathan Piercy, thus leaving his junior partner a clear field of action, and his son more than a fair chance to win the girl as a wife, through figuring in her eyes as a hero of song and story?"

Hardly a plausible explanation, and yet 'twas one which Verne Velvet felt singularly loth to abandon as absurd.

"Then—take that big and blustering bully!" with thoughts shifting to suit. "What made the long scratches upon his face before I blurred them? Was it—did he shoot Dan Furlong, and get face scratched when he tumbled into that vine-clad tree at my shooting?"

And so the busy brain worked on, recalling various points and facts which another might have forgotten for all time, striving as best he might to weave all suspicions into proof, but as often forced to cease without full success. Then he muttered again:

"Well, the hour is coming when I'll know more about it all, but—there's a fair prospect for gay old times at Frisky Flat, anyway!"

CHAPTER XV.

ROUSING THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

Mid-afternoon of the day which witnessed his triumphant home-coming, saw Kent Kerlin afoot, lounging through Frisky Flat in rather an aimless manner, with more of a frown than a smile upon his darkly handsome countenance.

In plain truth the young man was far from pleased with the "clean-up" of his recent experience.

After all that had happened, after his repeatedly risking life on behalf of a maiden; surely he had a right to expect something more than uneasy clasp of hand and faintly murmured thanks? Surely his reward ought to have been just a little more in proportion to his services?

"If it'd been anybody else, she'd slop all over him like a—no, she wouldn't, either! Unless—curses cover that Fred Granger from top to toe!"

A strong hand clenched nervously, while those black eyes caught a reddish tinge back in their depths. Just then Kent Kerlin looked far from lovely, far from lovable, for the "green-eyed monster" was gnawing at his heart-strings with malicious vigor.

The young man turned abruptly, as though urged by jealous hatred to at once seek out his real or supposed rival, but, instead, he came face to face with another of that ilk; Roger Kerlin, partner to Nathan Piercy in both banking and mining business.

"Careful, boy!" was the elder's salutation. "Have you taken a contract to run rough-shod over all in Frisky Flat?"

"No, but—what's the matter with you, sir?"

This in a tone of surprise as their eyes met; for that face showed signs of uneasiness, if not of actual dread.

This was something very unusual where Roger Kerlin was concerned, for that worthy was universally admitted by both friend and enemy to be "hard as nails," and even more difficult to drive.

There were some, too, who marveled at that odd combination: Piercy so reserved, so dignified, so averse to anything on the "sporty" order; while his partner was most decidedly "one of the boys," ever ready to give or take the odds, turn a card, or empty a friendly glass.

But, just now, Roger Kerlin looked anything but a jolly joker, and there was a masked trouble in that strong face, which quickened the young man's curiosity.

Casting a swift glance around, like one who feels apprehensive of eavesdropping, Roger Kerlin slipped a hand through his son's arm, then slowly moved away, speaking in guarded tones as he did so.

"I've been to see that hot-headed fool, Curly Rebb, and he has—Who do you reckon that stranger is, Kent?"

"The fellow on the white horse?"

"Who else? Out with it, boy! Who is he, anyway?"

"Well, you surely know as much as I do, sir," hesitatingly came the answer. "Still, I can't make it seem anything worse than this: a wandering card-sharp on the look-out for fresh pastures."

"Do you really think so?"

Something in those tones caused Kent to partly turn and bend head for a keener look into face of father. A brief gaze, then he spoke:

"What's the matter with you, sir, anyway? You both look and act as though you had seen—well, call it a ghost!"

Kent laughed softly at that ridiculous idea, but his mirth was not contagious, and there were both gloom and irritation in the elder man's next words.

"Ghost or devil, I wish I might be sure of one thing which—but let it pass, for now!" making an evident effort to rally and to cast off that strange feeling so foreign to his nature.

"You mean something, father; what is it?"

"I mean just this, for one thing; if that fellow crosses my path in good earnest, I'll lay him out worse than he served Curly—sure!"

Kent gave a low, half-malicious laugh at this fierce outburst, then spoke again:

"Don't make too many rash promises, daddy."

"What do mean by that, boy?"

"That I'm not so mighty certain this wandering sharp hasn't already crossed you out, sir!"

"What? How?"

The younger man flashed a swift look around, then added:

"With the Lady Leota, for instance!"

Roger Kerlin gave a start at this, his dark face growing visibly paler for a single breath, then filling with hot blood as he harshly demanded:

"What do you mean, Kent? Out with it, I say!"

"Well, sir, it's pretty much like this: I saw the Lady going for a bit of a stroll, not so long since—"

"As is her custom; you know that, boy!"

"Yes, I know that," was the easy reply. "I know all about that habit of the Queen's. I know she is accustomed to take the air whenever 'tis pleasant, just about this time of day, too."

"Well, what of it, then?"

"I saw her go east to-day."

"What of it?" in irritated repetition. "Why not east, as well as west, north or south?"

"Oh, nothing at all, daddy, only—I just happened to see that same dandified stranger take a little walk in that same direction something like an hour ago, and—wonder if they will happen to meet?"

With admirably assumed carelessness came these words, but a malicious twinkle in those dark eyes seemed to hint at something more than innocent gossip.

Roger Kerlin shrunk as though a rude hand had touched an open sore, but as quickly rallied, forcing a short, harsh laugh as he met those keen eyes. He gave toss of shaggy head and made an impatient gesture of hand before speaking.

"Well, what of it? This is a free country, isn't it? And people are privileged to walk in whichever direction their fancy moves, I reckon?"

Kent gave a curt nod at this, speaking in off-hand tones:

"Of course, father. I'm not saying different, and meant nothing more than—in fact, I dare say all this means just nothing at all. There may be no connection between the two, but—"

"Out with it, now you've made a beginning, boy!"

"Well, you know the old proverb, father; birds of a feather will go in flocks," coolly answered the young man. "And while two mayn't properly be called just that, they can make it mighty interesting—to one another—if they feel so inclined!"

Smooth the words and even the tones, but beneath that seemingly frank surface lay a rankling barb which found the quick, just as it was intended.

Roger Kerlin dropped the arm to which he had been holding through all, only partially smothering a savage curse as he turned away.

"I say, daddy; whither away?" asked Kent, lip curling with a scarcely masked sneer. "Where are you going, now? May I keep you company?"

The elder man turned face toward the younger, showing teeth in a far from pleasant manner. One brief-lived scowl, then he laughed, harshly, following with the words:

"Don't you worry your poor head over me or my doings, Kent. Better take heed to your own sweet game if you really care to win her, boy!"

That was rather more than Kent Kerlin anticipated, and his smile swiftly faded away as he almost involuntarily demanded:

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Well, cipher it out for yourself, Kent, only—I saw Fred Granger going over to Piercy's house not long ago, and—ha! ha! ha!"

Leaving that sentence incomplete, Roger Kerlin turned abruptly, walking away with assumed carelessness, leaving his son in anything but an angelic mood.

That was proven by what came next; a mocking call from the younger lips, which formed the words:

"Love to the new mamma when—all right, daddy!"

Kent laughed merrily as that burly figure turned sharply his way to make a threatening gesture; and then, neither willing to continue the verbal combat, their backs turned toward each other, each moving away as if wholly untroubled and unconcerned.

Yet this was true of neither man.

Both father and son were feeling the keenest pangs of jealousy, and though they strove to mask that purpose, each one felt that he must find out the whole truth with little loss of time.

If anything, Roger Kerlin was most troubled, because he was madly in love with the Lady Leota spoken of, and knew from past experience how capricious that dashing "queen of chance" could show herself at times.

He was too proud to at once strike out in the direction named by his worthy son, for this was not the first time Kent had twitted upon delicate facts; but as soon as he might without having those maliciously keen eyes taking note of his movements, the banker in love headed for the rock-dotted hills which lay to the east of Frisky Flat.

Once feeling at liberty to extend himself, Roger Kerlin made more than fair time, although his keenest glances as yet failed to show him aught of either woman or man, loved one or hated.

Still, there were thousands of places yonder where both man and woman might stand screened from eye of jealous lover until but a few yards of space lay between; and knowing this, the banker hurried onward to learn the worst—or the best, rather!

For, he kept telling himself, it was impossible that this could be an assignation.

Lady Leota was not a woman of that sort, for one thing; for another, this stranger had come to Frisky Flat too recently to even form the faro-queen's acquaintance.

Unless—had they known each other in days gone by?

There lay the barb of that rankling shaft!

In spite of his passionate love and eager courtship, Roger Kerlin had learned so very little concerning Lady Leota, by which name and title this young and beautiful woman alone was known in Frisky Flat.

Almost a year had passed since she "came to town," shortly afterward opening a gambling place, with bar attachment, creating a sensation the very first night by presiding with rare grace and skill at the main table, which was devoted to the game of faro.

From the very outset Lady Leota commanded the respect of all her patrons, nor could a slurring word be turned her way since that opening with anything like truth to back it up.

At first Roger Kerlin was a skeptic, and kept fairly aloof from this blonde goddess of chance; but then his hour came, and from that to this his dearest hope in life seemed to be the winning of Lady Leota for a wife.

Much of this was running through Roger Kerlin's brain as he picked his way through those out-lying bowlders, looking and listening for some sign of his loved one.

Yet other and far less agreeable thoughts were giving him trouble, just then; another face, almost equally fair, yet after such a different style, was dancing before his mental vision; the face of Verne Velvet, whose arrival at Frisky Flat had caused such a sensation that day.

Who was he? What was he? Why had he come here, almost like a ghost of the dead past which—

"If I thought—if it should be—bah!" making a swiftly impatient gesture as though he would cast the mad fancy aside forever. "I am growing crazy to even dream of such a thing! I will not—ha!"

As yet Kerlin had failed to see or hear aught of the woman he was seeking, but now a shrill scream came from no great distance ahead, plainly of feminine birth, and just as clearly one of pain or of terror.

"That's Lady Leota, and—coming, my love!" shouted Kerlin, whipping forth a revolver and cocking the weapon as he dashed forward.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY LEOTA IN A COY MOOD.

He never stopped to count the cost, or to give thought to what might be his own peril; all he knew just then was that the woman of his mad adoration was surely in need of assistance, and so—pistol in hand Roger Kerlin made his rush at reckless speed.

He had not far to go, and ears guided him aright. A dozen vigorous leaps, ending in an adroit dodge around a huge rock, to cross which was impossible, then the banker came face to face with Lady Leota—and something else!

That "something else" took the shape of a leveled revolver, back of which showed the darkly handsome face and graceful shape of the Dude in Velvet, who caught the drop with practiced skill the instant that burly figure was revealed.

"Steady, stranger!" sounded the Sport's voice in cool accents, yet like one who means business all over. "Don't crowd us too mighty close, I beg of you, sir!"

"You, Mr. Kerlin?"

This from the lips of Lady Leota herself, and sound of voice, sight of loved face seemed to set the love-lorn banker fairly on fire.

One swift look from man to woman, then back again; and paying no heed to the leveled weapon which covered his broad bosom, Kerlin spoke in harshly stern tones:

"Yes, and—I'll kill you like a mad dog if you have harmed or insulted this lady!"

The cold, set look upon that handsome face moderated as Verne Velvet recognized the speaker and took note of his words, and as Kerlin broke off the Sport bowed slightly toward the lady, saying:

"This is a friend of yours, madam?"

"Yes, but—"

"Enough, and to spare, my dear madam," politely assured the Dude in Velvet as he bowed lower, lowering his revolver and slipping it out of sight with no apparent fear of that action being taken advantage of by yonder scowling, stern-faced intruder.

Roger Kerlin caught breath sharply at this, and as though involuntarily his own weapon moved upward; but just as quickly Lady Leota took a step between, hand coming forward as a smile entered her chamingly blonde face.

"I am so glad you have come, Mr. Kerlin! But—that horrid gun! Put it away, please!"

"Then there isn't—I heard you scream out for—it was you, my—Lady Leota?" confusedly uttered the banker, abashed before this marvel of grace and beauty, bold though he might appear in face of man alone.

"Did you hear me, Mr. Kerlin? I am ashamed of it, now, but then—ugh!" with a nervous little shake and shiver which appeals so powerfully to one of the opposite sex. "I always did hate—snakes!"

During this the Sport had turned aside, bending over something as yet hidden from Kerlin. Now he again drew a revolver, and with a deft motion lifted upon its polished barrel the still squirming body of an unusually large rattlesnake; large for the Western country, that is, where no such hideous monsters as those of the Southern climes are to be found.

With a light laugh the Velvet Sport held this out toward the other people, easily speaking as he did so:

"This must plead excuse for my rude intrusion, madam. I luckily chanced to espy the fellow, and—well, I hate to run any long chances with gentry of this description, don't you know?"

Lady Leota shrunk back with another shudder, clasping Roger Kerlin's arm with pretty grace as though feeling the need of protection even yet.

"Keep it away, can't you?" angrily cried the banker.

"And 'twould have bitten me if—oh, sir, how can I thank you for saving—for killing the horrid creature?"

"I am already thanked to excess, my dear lady," assured the Dude in Velvet, with a graceful bow, then eyes coming back to that slowly writhing reptile, the armed tail of which was still giving a faint warning at irregular intervals.

"Not so much to look at is it? One accustomed to the sluggish monsters born and reared in the timber-land, would regard this pretty fellow with scorn and contempt; but—I'm not so certain which representative I'd rather have kiss me!"

"Ugh! How can you say such horrible things, Mr.—"

"Velvet; Verne Velvet, Lady Leota."

Both woman and man gave start at this, but while the banker scowled with reviving jealousy, the lady smiled brightly, although there certainly was surprise in voice as in face when she spoke again:

"You know me, then, sir? I thought—I believe this is the first time I ever met—Mr. Velvet?"

"Nevertheless, the name and fame of Lady Leota and her 'At Home' has been fairly familiar to my ears for—well, time sufficient to fetch me all the way to Frisky Flat!"

"Then you are a—"

"Sporting man? Yes, after a meek and modest fashion," declared the Man of Velvet, giving that ugly carcass a deft toss which sent it far out of sight amongst those thick-lying rocks.

"Then I may hope to see you again?" with a coquettish smile and glance of those gold-lashed eyes which added no little to Roger Kerlin's green-eyed malady.

"May I hope for that pleasure, madam?"

"I am always 'At Home' to lovers of cards and chances!" declared Lady Leota, with a little nod and light laugh which sounded almost malicious to those listening ears.

"That's the name of her place, you understand?" eagerly explained Kerlin, lest this audacious stranger take more for granted than the law allowed.

"So I have heard, and so—until our next meeting, Lady Leota!"

With smile and bow, the Velvet Dude turned away, as though to resume a stroll which had been interrupted by this little episode.

Lady Leota looked after the graceful figure until it was lost to further view amid those rocks, then something like a faint sigh came through her red-ripe lips.

Roger Kerlin scowled at this, for it served to revive the fierce jealousy which had partially died away as he grew nearly convinced that these people were indeed strangers to each other.

Lady Leota caught a glimpse of that scowl, and another brief shiver passed over her tall and charmingly proportioned figure.

In one of his worst moods, now, Kerlin took this for disgust or loathing at the contrast, and in harsh tones, he demanded:

"Look here, my lady; did you come out here just to meet that infernal dude?"

Instead of replying in words, Lady Leota drew back with proudly haughty movement, her big blue eyes flashing, her red lips compressing in ominous fashion.

Even as those hot and hasty words left his lips, Kerlin felt that he was making a serious mistake, but he had gone too far for easy retreat, and so added:

"If I really knew—if I even seriously thought just that, my darling, I'd follow and kill yonder whelp as I might—"

"Stop, sir!" cried Lady Leota, emphasizing her speech with stamp of foot and gesture of gloved hand. "By what right do you dare—"

With a swift movement Kerlin caught hand and pressed lips to the fair skin which showed just above the tanned kid; then he spoke in tones of genuine passion, his face and eyes both backing up his speech:

"By the right of my love for you, Leota! Oh, my darling! If you only knew—if you could even begin to realize how utterly precious you are in my sight—you would forgive me this! Ay, more! You would never again give me fair cause for feeling jealous as I have this—"

With a quick movement gloved hand slipped for an instant over his lips, cut-

ting short his speech. For Roger Kerlin caught and kissed that dainty palm, not once, but until it was withdrawn by the lady, her face flushed a bit more than usual.

"Stop—you really must not, Mr. Kerlin," she said, in slightly unsteady tones, then moving away in the direction of Frisky Flat, as one might who feels desirous of cutting short an embarrassing, if not an unpleasant, interview.

"Leota, how can I help it, when I love you so madly?" urged the banker, as he regained her side. "Why will you—are you offended with me, Lady Leota?"

"I certainly have ample grounds for feeling offended, Mr. Kerlin," the lady replied, evading his attempt to clasp her hand. "You as good as charged me with—and he a perfect stranger, too!"

"I must humbly beg your pardon for that, Leota. I'd promise to never again offend in like manner, but how can I help it? Let me see a man in your company, and the devil of jealousy rises up until—"

"Have I given you any right to feel that way, sir?"

"Any right?" echoed Kerlin.

"Yes. Have I accepted your—am I bound to you, even?"

"No, but I wish you were! I wish to heaven you might be, darling!" impulsively cried the love-lorn banker of Frisky Flat. "Why will you prolong my misery, Leota? Surely you have proven me true? Surely this period of probation has lasted sufficiently long?"

But Lady Leota again avoided that eager hand, shaking head and giving a low, musical laugh as she quickened her steps toward the now visible town.

"Not now nor here, my—Mr. Kerlin! If the whole town should see us like—no, no!"

"Let the whole town see, then! Let the whole world see, for that matter! What do I care about—"

"But I care, Mr. Kerlin, and that ought to be sufficient for you, sir. And so—not now nor here, I repeat!"

Although the words themselves sounded decisive enough, they came from lips which were smiling almost roguishly, while those big and lustrous blue eyes sparkled coquettishly whenever Kerlin was lucky enough to catch one of their shy glances.

"If not now and here, when and where, darling?" he persisted, rendered all the more eager as she grew coy. "How much longer will you keep me on probation, Leota? When may I—call you mine, all mine, darling?"

Again that musical laugh, once more that graceful evasion, and then came the coquettish words:

"Not yet—not yet am I ready to surrender all to a master; and that master a fiercely jealous one, too!"

"I'll never be jealous, then, darling!" vowed Kerlin, almost beside himself with ardor. "With you my wife—gods! It makes me dizzy just to think of such wild happiness, my angel!"

Again he would have made actual demonstration of that passion, only for the quick action taken by Lady Leota.

She sprung aside and onward, then motioning him away with arch decision, tones almost stern, if her face and eyes were bright and smiling.

"Be careful, sir! Don't make me really regret having given you even so much encouragement. Remember that more than half my stock in trade consists of my good name, and now—would you dim the lustre of that in other eyes by forcing me to submit to—public caresses?"

"Of course not, darling, only I feel that—"

"Crush down those feelings, then, or I must forbid your entering my presence. Say that you will do this, for my sake?"

"I will! I would do anything, everything, for your sake, my angel!"

"Then I shall look for you to-night, as usual," accompanying the words with a shy yet alluring glance from those bewitching eyes. "Now, Roger, go your way, and permit me to go mine—alone!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FARO QUEEN OF THE "AT HOME."

The Sport in Velvet hardly left his chamber long enough to partake of the regular meals that day, spending his time for the most part in smoking and thinking, and possibly planning the next movements in the private game he came to Frisky Flat to play for large stakes.

But, like so many of the individuals who belong to the class he modestly claimed was his own, Verne Velvet seemed to only fairly wake up as the evening shades came.

That evening was still quite young when the Velvet Dude emerged from his hotel and strolled leisurely down the dusty street which formed the main thoroughfare of Frisky Flat, looking strangely out of place with his garb, his boutonniere, his city airs and grace.

Although numerous looks were turned his way, and many remarks were given birth by that appearance, the stranger fared far better than could have been expected.

Whatever might have been thought anent his "putting on dog," Velvet had already proven himself something more and something vastly better than "a traveling sign," and in downing Curly Rebb he had won for himself exemption for those same clothes.

Altogether unlike one who was looking for fun of the recent sort, the sport strolled on, looking briefly in at several of the resorts which are plentiful in all live mining towns, but apparently finding nothing which exactly suited his taste until he caught sight of the brilliantly illuminated front and transparency of the "AT HOME."

Something in the queer title drew Velvet that way, and after a look and half-smile up at that sign, he entered the building itself.

A single keen glance summed up the place with fair accuracy, and no doubt briefly recalled to this stranger a brief-lived memory of the more than fair blonde whom he had met out yonder among the rugged boulders that same day.

A queer sort of establishment for a lady to preside over, but still one which was conducted with a greater degree of order and decency than may be expected from such places, as a rule; a saloon and gambling hall in combination.

Evidently the "At Home" enjoyed a liberal patronage, for two white-aproned attendants back of the polished bar could scarcely keep the public wants supplied, while men of almost all ages and apparent conditions of life were passing on to the adjoining apartment, a long room cut off from the saloon proper by a curtain-draped arch-way, where tables for faro and other so-called "games of chance" were ready set for the accommodation of the patrons.

Evidently deeming it wisest to follow the customs of the country in which he now found himself, Verne Velvet patiently waited his turn at the bar, indulging himself in a light drink and a fairly good cigar, then passing on into the play-room.

As is generally the case, the place of honor was given to a faro lay-out, and at this table Lady Leota was already seated, silver dealing-box in hand, and the game fairly under way, although as yet the playing was but lukewarm.

On her side of the table was stationed a middle-aged man of quiet bearing who served as "look-out" and "case-keeper," both in one; but it required only a very brief note-taking to reach the conclusion that Lady Leota was the responsible head and front of that establishment.

To one a stranger within the gates, that pearl-handled, silver-plated revolver which rested conveniently near the blonde queen's left hand on the table might have caused surprise; but not so with this Sport in Velvet.

He knew without being told that the weapon was there for use, not for ornament alone. And he rather more than

"guessed" that, should occasion arise, Lady Leota could and would call the silent assistant into play without a moment's hesitation.

Having taken in all these preliminaries, the sport moved leisurely about the room, outwardly the picture of graceful ease and indolence, but through all keenly alert and working toward his main end in life.

Just now Velvet was far more deeply interested in men than in cards or in cash-making, and those nut-brown eyes saw far more than their owner was credited with, during that first half-hour or more.

For one thing, the Velvet Dude was trying to learn just what degree of probability there might be in his belief that the road-agent gang as a rule rendezvoused right there in Frisky Flat, and it was not long ere he had "spotted" a couple of tough-looking cases whom he more than suspected of holding connection with the illegal outfit.

Taking care not to draw too close attention his own way, then, Verne Velvet studied these fellows until he deemed it advisable to apply a more decided test, after his own peculiar fashion.

Choosing a moment when the two men were fairly apart from the tables and their devotees, and the couple themselves separated by a few feet, he passed near, to counterfeit one of those coarse voices, making use of the words:

"When we gwine to meet the boss fer a divvy, pardy?"

With simultaneous start and scowl the men turned one upon the other, each fancying that question came from his mate, and one of them almost savagely growling out:

"Keerful, you! What ef arybody should ketch—"

The Velvet Sport did not pause to catch more, but passed leisurely on, those faces indelibly photographed upon his brain, fairly satisfied that his "guess" was well-founded.

After all, his interest hardly lay with these lesser lights, and the sport moved closer to the faro table over which Lady Leota presided, for there he saw Roger Kerlin, just slipping into a seat which, apparently, had been kept for his coming.

The next half-hour or more was devoted to covertly studying the combination, as viewed from that particular standpoint, now, as always, doing his work without aught to call unwelcome notice his own way.

It called for no vast acumen to decide upon one point; that Roger Kerlin was strongly smitten with the faro queen's charms of mind and person, or that the Frisky Flat banker was playing more for the woman herself than for her capital.

Not that Kerlin purposely threw away his money; he was by far too good a business man for that; but he played as a man will who feels wholly indifferent whether he wins or loses.

That he had come prepared to leave a considerable sum behind him was made manifest by his method of staking large sums invariably, and as often placed where the odds were in favor of the bank as where his chances looked the brightest.

Others beside Verne Velvet were taking notes, and while order was maintained in more than fair degree, taking time and place and conditions all into consideration, Roger Kerlin must have turned a deaf ear that way, or have donned a thicker skin than he usually wore.

One surly-voiced citizen in particular seemed inclined to air his views, having abandoned a seat at the faro-table as his streak of ill-luck culminated in a mistaken coup.

Without looking that way, the Velvet Dude heard a newcomer give subdued greeting, then ask:

"Why aren't you playing, Jimmy?"

"'Cause Tommy didn't eat his supper," came the half-doleful answer as the seedy

representative of bad luck shrugged his shoulders, then gave a curt nod toward the banker, to add: "You see the big load?"

"Yes. What of it? That's no uncommon sight, I fancy!"

"Nor unpleasant one, either, to—some folks!"

"You mean?"

"That she's no use for little suckers, now there's a big, fat whale flopping in her pond; don't you see it?"

"Is that so? A case of smit, then, is it?"

"Sure!"

There was a half-frown upon the Sport's face as he turned a keen glance that way, summing the speakers up as only a man of his calibre knew how.

A brief silence followed, broken by the more recent arrival.

"Well, pardner, of course you may be in the right, but—I doubt it! Even up that Lady Leota serves him just as she has served better men; throws him over her shoulder when he has fairly dropped his boodle into her lap!"

"Well, I couldn't take you up if I wanted to, unless—"

"What?"

"The Lady's got my rocks to the last dribble, and never gave back so much as a weenty smile by way of change!"

"Cleaned out, is it?"

"Clear down to bedrock, and never a color left. Still—"

"Say it, pardner."

"Just coax her to stake me, and it's a whack, old man!"

With a brief laugh at this cool proposal, the friend moved an amendment, and then they passed away, hand in arm, heading for the bar to drink better luck the next time.

There was something of a smile playing about the daintily mustached lips of the Velvet Dude as he listened to this interchange of words, and one might have fancied he was pleased with what he heard, though just on what particular score would not be so easily decided.

With the departure of those two chatters, quiet fell over those immediate surroundings, and Verne Velvet moved a bit closer the faro lay-out, apparently growing more interested in the varying fortunes of the game.

Roger Kerlin was playing boldly, but evidently without sticking to any regular formula, and while he kept close run of the cards as they fell, that was purely the instinct of a thoroughbred gambler, since his eyes were for the most part fixed upon that fair, proud face across the painted lay-out.

Then, for the first time since entering the play-room, Verne Velvet caught those big blue eyes, holding them for a brace of seconds. And—was that slight nod also an invitation for him to take a more active part in the game?

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPORT COPPERS THE BANKER

Whether this was actually the case or not, Verne Velvet placed that interpretation upon the barely perceptible recognition vouchsafed him by yonder faro queen and giving back her nod with one a bit more pronounced, he moved that way as though growing weary of idleness where such a fair chance offered for playing.

Lady Leota was dealing the game, slowly and regularly pulling the cards, with brief pauses for paying or raking in the bets lost or won, and if the Velvet Dude hoped for a more open greeting through those lustrous orbs of heavenly blue, he was fated to be disappointed.

Moving up until he could fairly command a view of the lay-out, Verne Velvet took a station close back of the busy banker, looking over his left shoulder to follow the fall of the cards.

This was nothing more than the wonted precaution taken by an old hand at the business, with brain to serve as card for pricking cases; and none of the reg-

ular players vouchsafed this new comer even a look in passing.

While the bank was plentifully supplied with chips of the three colors, stacked in their box, money was not barred; indeed, the majority of stakes were represented by actual cash.

Hence there was no notice taken when Velvet leaned forward to drop a folded bill upon one of the painted cards, at the same time placing a checker upon the money, thus intimating by gambler's code that he wished to back the card to lose, not win.

(This, as some few readers may require to be told, is "coppering" a card, instead of playing it "open," or to win.)

Just a moment before Roger Kerlin had placed a stack of blues upon that same card to win out; but where each man is entitled to his own opinion, a trifling difference like this occasions no comment.

The Velvet Dude seemed content to await the turn of fortune before adding to his financial interest in the deal; but that suspense was by no means prolonged. The fourth card drawn determined which judgment was the better, and the banknote went to pay off the winning stack of blue.

Again Roger Kerlin shoved a stack to a card, and the next instant a similar amount was coppered by its side.

This time a slight frown darkened that swarthy visage, but the banker disdained to turn head for a glance at the individual who doubted his gambling acumen, and the deal progressed.

Longer now than before, but with the same result; the banker won, and the money of the Velvet Sport paid the bank's losses, so far as Roger Kerlin was concerned.

Up to this stage of the game, so far as the Sport's observation went, Kerlin was caring little how the cards might fall, betting simply because that gave him a license to sit and feast his eyes upon the rare charms of the faro queen, whom he so passionately loved.

So far, too, fortune had kept the scales fairly balanced, and neither bank nor banker was much the loser in the long run.

But now fate seemed to turn, and the weight cast therein by this dandified stranger in Frisky Flat only served to turn the scales toward Roger Kerlin, rather than against him.

Still, even twice does not prove a rule, and for the third time those near who began to feel a growing interest in players over play, saw the Sport deliberately "copper" the banker.

While twice might come to pass through pure chance, thrice in succession was almost too much of a good thing, and with a surly growl at such impudence—not to call it worse—Roger Kerlin turned head to see whom he was indebted to for this new sensation.

Brown eyes met black, and a half-smile of recognition came into the sport's face; but Kerlin made no sign, save by muttering a curse, then turning head toward board once more, just in time to see his third successive winning, Velvet's third heavy loss.

"Hit a snag, fer a fact!" muttered one of the lighter players, holding his seat, yet neglecting to do any betting for the time being.

"If so, I'll run right over it, not back off, my dear sir," smoothly yet pointedly declared the dude, white and slender fingers producing a fresh roll of bills, waiting to select one until the banker should place a bet.

But that placing did not occur as promptly as usual, and the sport let a bill drift out of his fingers, to settle where fate willed.

It was a freak such as a genuine gambler is partial to when his luck is running crooked, and those who witnessed the act took this as evidence that the stranger recognized he was not just "in vein," and the offering of a sacrifice to capricious Dame Fortune.

Even Roger Kerlin watched for that random wager to be decided with greater interest than he cared to display, and his breath came long and hard as he saw luck turn toward the man who had given him such a fierce pang of jealousy that same day.

"There's nothing so uncertain as a dead-sure thing, gentlemen," came coolly from those mustached lips as his winnings were paid over. "I may not be smart, but I'm lucky. You can see that for yourselves!"

The box was nearly empty, and after pausing the usual limit for those who might wish to "call the turn," Lady Leota pulled the final cards, then deftly shuffled the pack, and as a voluntary proof that no "skin game" was permitted within her domains, handed the cards over to be cut by one of the bank's opponents.

Roger Kerlin swiftly forestalled all others, but 'twas to touch the smooth, warm, velvety hand of his adored one rather than to cut the deck.

A faint smile came into the sport's face as he took notes; but he made no comment, and Lady Leota seemed in ignorance of that little ruse on the part of her worshipper.

The cards were slipped into the box, then the fair queen of faro waited for those who wished to place their bets.

After a barely perceptible hesitation Roger Kerlin strung several wagers in swift succession, apparently without any system; but the covert glance which shot from corner of his eye toward the Velvet Dude betrayed his real animus.

And then, cool as ever, Verne duplicated that action, with the addition of a copper to each banknote.

It was too deliberate an action to pass unnoticed, and flushing hotly the banker partly turned in chair to glare into that handsome face, speaking harshly:

"Are you trying to hoodoo my luck, young fellow?"

"No, sir," came the prompt reply, in smoothly courteous tones. "Why should I, pray?"

"Well, it certainly looks that way, and so—I don't like it, sir!"

"Indeed? Well, Mr. Kerlin, of course I'd hate awfully to cross you in any manner which could well be avoided, but, in fact, I can't see the chances in your light. Merely a difference of opinion, you understand?"

"I understand this much: I'm not used to being coppered at every turn, and what's more—I like the actor just as much as I do his method!"

This came almost with the force of a threat, but instead of picking up what he might easily interpret as a gauntlet of defiance, Velvet gazed keenly into those eyes for a bit, then deliberately spoke:

"Do you know, Mr. Kerlin, that I've noticed that before? Noticed that something in my face doesn't seem to suit you at all! Now, pray, may I ask you one thing?"

"What has your face got to do with me, I'd like to know?" gruffly demanded the banker, frowning more darkly than ever, although—or was it altogether fancy?—his bronzed face seemed to turn a shade paler.

"And so would I!" swiftly cried the sport, with eyes glittering as though set in front of a burning fire. "I've often had people tell me I'm the perfect image of my father as he was at my present age. Did you ever see or know my father, Mr. Kerlin?"

"Curse your father and your—" angrily began the banker, only to be cut short by the sport, whose smooth tones turned hard and metallic as he spoke:

"Steady, if you please, Roger Kerlin! Curse me if you like, and I'll merely consider the source; but my father—he was basely murdered by a villain whom you—"

The banker sprung from his seat with a half-smothered oath, face almost livid and eyes glowing like coals of fire as he confronted the Sport in Velvet, speaking harshly:

"What are you trying to insinuate, sir? Are you picking a quarrel with me, presuming upon the presence of a lady to shield you from—"

"Order, gentlemen!" that same lady made herself heard by all within the room, white hand abandoning cards for gun, thumb lifting the hammer to make the rest come easier if worse must follow. "No rowing in here. If you must quarrel, oblige me by adjourning to the outer air."

Lady Leota made no verbal threats, but her ready pistol provided for all that was lacking, and woman though she was, those big blue eyes said "shoot" in every gleam and glitter.

Roger Kerlin sunk into his seat with a surly growl, and the Velvet Dude bowed with meek humility, hands crossing over bosom like devotee in front of a sacred shrine.

A slight flush came into the faro queen's face at this, but after a brief hesitation she resumed her place, laying revolver upon the table without lowering the hammer, once more pulling cards from box.

For a number of turns neither of the bets placed by the two men who were running so contrary to each other were decided by fall of cards at touch of the queen, but then in rapid succession, just as though they had been placed in position by order of the player himself, the trio of wagers were settled; and each one in favor of Roger Kerlin!

Of course this might have been pure chance, although that in itself would almost constitute a miracle; but the face of Lady Leota flushed warmly as the cards came forth in that order, and none the less because a low, half-mocking laugh broke from the lips of the Velvet Dude.

Verne waited until the stakes were paid over, then spoke in tones of half-awe, half-envy:

"Such is life in the far west! Now, if I had a neat little lien on such a fair—"

His sentence was never finished, for, with a sharp cry, Lady Leota snatched up her revolver and fired, pointblank!

CHAPTER XIX.

VERNE VELVET OFFERS A WAGER.

To nearly every one who was keen-eyed enough to catch that swift movement of hand and weapon before the explosion came, it seemed as though Lady Leota fired point-blank into the handsome face of the Velvet Dude, to avenge an implied insult, which the bold stranger was not granted time to finish.

But one of those few was Velvet himself, and though he took instant action, it was toward a far different antagonist than the blonde faro queen.

And all at once it dawned upon the startled assembly that, so far from aiming to slay the stranger, Lady Leota had in all probability saved his life from falling forfeit to a foul assassin.

She saw an armed right hand suddenly go up just behind the Sport in Velvet, and at the bright glimmer of naked steel in the lamp light, her revolver leaped into action, her voice ringing forth in sharp, warning:

"On guard, stranger?"

It was a lovely snap-shot, and one which only a cool head and true hand would have risked; or, if risked, could have accomplished; for but little more than bronzed paw gripping knife-hilt could be seen, and that was rising swiftly for the dastard's stroke from the rear.

Spat!

The bullet struck the brass hand-guard, flattening and flying into a score of bits, stinging keenly as thrust of hornet and with force sufficient to check if it could not entirely stop that savage blow.

A hoarse yell of mad fury burst upon all ears, and then the Dude in Velvet whirled around, head ducking and shooting to one side as its owner lurched toward rather than from the would-be murderer.

This permitted that armed hand, now

sprinkling blood from a round dozen surface wounds, to pass over that stooping shoulder, forearm striking sharply even as fingers of steel closed about the wrist itself.

A sharp jerk and wrench combined partially benumbed those fingers, then the Velvet Sport flung all his power into one tremendous effort, driving the rascal backward and forcing his arm upward.

Another fierce wrench sent that ugly weapon flying through the limp light, to bury its keen point in the wooden ceiling overhead, there to hang as a quivering bit of testimony.

By this time all was confusion the most intense throughout the long apartment devoted to gambling, men scrambling over each other in their instinctive efforts to get out of danger's range.

Roger Kerlin was upon his feet, gun out and ready for action, and only for the promptitude with which Lady Leota gave him warning, worse might easily have befallen the stranger in trouble.

"Stop, Roger!" cried the faro queen, leaning forward to tap the arm of the banker with the still smoking muzzle of her pistol, since Kerlin was just within the reach of her hand itself.

Scarcely another in all Frisky Flat could have asked the man just then, but with Roger Kerlin Lady Leota was all-powerful, still.

At the same instant his deft action sent that gleaming tool flying away, Velvet struck swift and hard with his clenched left hand, laying open a bruised cut and still further disfiguring that passion-inflamed visage.

"You, is it, Curly Rebb?" he cried, sharply, as recognition bore that blow company. "Are you all hog? Will you never get enough to—"

"I'll kill you! I'll cut your heart out like—"

"Oh, go hunt your hole, Curly! Like—just so!"

Those white hands fastened upon the baffled thug, and much as a giant might handle a pigmy, Verne Velvet rushed the fellow across the room to where a closed window marked the further wall, then made a herculean effort, heaving Rebb clear of his unsteady footing and whirling him to a level with his own head.

A cry of wonder burst from more lips than one at this truly marvelous exhibition, but without a pause the Dude in Velvet hurled his would-be assassin head-first into the window, smashing glass and sash and dashing wide the wooden shutter itself.

A howl and curse of mingled rage, pain and terror broke from lips of luckless bully, then he vanished from view of those marveling eyes, passing into the outer darkness.

Verne Velvet turned at once from the improvised adit, lightly brushing palms with finger-tips, looking as cool and unruffled as he might on freshly emerging from his toilet chamber.

An almost involuntary cheer burst from those spectators, fairly carried away by that dashing deed, and as a smile began to dawn upon his more than comely visage, Velvet tipped his hat in acknowledgment.

This done, he advanced to his former station near the faro table, bowing with still more formality to the presiding goddess, his voice full of earnestness as he spoke:

"I humbly beg your pardon for causing so much bother, Lady Leota, and, while I am aware empty speech is poor reward, I wish to most heartily thank you for my life. Though worthless enough to others, to me—well, being the only one of its kind, I naturally value it at no small price."

Outwardly, at least, there seemed a trace of mockery in this speech, and as he listened, Roger Kerlin frowned darkly.

Not so with the faro queen. She bowed slightly, then made reply:

"Pray don't mention it, sir. There is a

standing rule 'At Home' which expressly bars all rowdism. And, really, Curly Rebb was rather overstepping those limits."

"Still, madam, I owe you my life. May the day soon come when I can repay the debt by as valuable a service."

"A heap of talk over a trifle," surlily muttered Kerlin, once more in his seat and fingering his stacks of colored chips as though eager to get back to business.

A smile dawned upon the Velvet Dude's face at this characteristic interruption, and with a final bow to Lady Leota he gently tapped an arm of the banker the more surely to attract attention.

"Well?" curtly demanded Kerlin, eyes glowing as they shot a glance up through his shaggy eyebrows. "What fresh flea's biting you now?"

"I believe I was on the point of saying something when that unmannerly fellow tried to put in his oar?" easily spoke the Sport, with bow to match his bland smile.

"Don't you reckon you've been shooting off your mouth just a bit too extensively, anyway, stranger?" bluntly asked the gambler, not caring to disguise the strong antagonism which he felt for this dandified man from the unknown regions.

"Is that really your candid opinion, my dear sir?" almost cooed the Velvet Sport in his turn. "Queer, isn't it, how people will differ? But, as I started to say when Curly Rebb chipped so rashly, if I could count on a fair shake, or an even lien on fair fortune, I honestly believe that I could convince even you, dear sir, that my system of playing faro is the correct one, and far superior to the one which you are placing your wealth upon this night!"

That frown faded away, probably because Roger Kerlin caught a warning glance from those big blue eyes over the painted lay-out, and his face was hard as marble when he looked up, squarely meeting those nut-brown orbs.

"I never play with a stranger, sir," he said, coldly.

If he thought to bluff Velvet so readily, he was counting altogether without his host; for that bland smile grew more pronounced, and that silk-hatted head bowed anew as its owner spoke in smooth tones:

"Permit me to remedy that fault, my dear sir, by self-introduction. My name is Verne Velvet, a Sport on the loose. I am an enthusiastic lover of fun, yet I can be pure business on occasions, as I hope to prove ere we see the last of each other, Mr. Kerlin!"

Was there a double meaning in this smoothly cool speech?

For a moment or two the Frisky Flat banker thought it was, but then he doubted. Would this stranger be so outwardly mild, so coolly suave if he was indeed picking a quarrel which could scarcely end save in death or disability to one or the other?

A flush slowly crept into his dark visage, and his strong fingers contracted until those neat piles of colored chips were scattered, some falling to the floor, all unheeded by their owner for the moment.

Then those eyes met again, and Roger Kerlin slowly pronounced:

"You mean—is this a veiled threat, sir?"

With brows arched in real or perfectly simulated surprise, the Dude in Velvet spoke again:

"Why should I wish to either threaten or insult you, Mr. Kerlin? Surely your record of the past is clean and pure? Even if one so wished, how could a damning finger point toward a spot or stain where there was none to be found?"

Kerlin made an impatient gesture before saying:

"Enough of all this, stranger! I gamble merely for amusement and to kill time, which otherwise might hang heav-

ily upon my hands. And a game confined simply to us two would be—a bore!"

"But mighty interesting, for all that," declared the Sport, who seemed fated to run contrary to this opponent that evening. "Come, sir! I'll lay you a little wager—"

"I never bet," coldly declared the banker, as he restacked his chips before himself.

"Neither do I," as coolly retorted the Velvet Sport, "and so I say: Your own figures, at evens or odds, long or short, that you and I do engage in a battle royal for high stakes before this month fades into the past!"

Clear and positive came these words, leaving no room for doubting his exact meaning; but then, without waiting for the banker of Frisky Flat to make retort, the Dude from Nowhere in Particular turned easily away from the table, giving a parting bow and tip of hat to the faro queen as she sat at her silver box, then strode away toward the bar beyond those draped curtains.

Once through that archway, Verne Velvet flashed a keen look around, and noting how many of those interested witnesses were coming his way, he tossed some coin on the bar, bidding the attendants supply all who came at his expense, then passed out of the saloon as well.

CHAPTER XX.

FOWL OF THE SAME PLUMAGE.

Among those who witnessed that dastardly yet desperate attempt to assassinate the Velvet Dude were the two knaves whom the Ventriloquist Sport so startled by using his secret gifts not long before.

For a moment or two it seemed as though they would chip in to aid that battered bully, but ere they could fairly determine to risk popular favor by taking such radical action, the deed was done and Verne Velvet was turning away from that ruined window.

In no little awe by that exhibition of marvelous might and muscle in one who looked dandy rather than Hercules, the fellows slunk away, hurrying their steps as they passed out of the saloon itself.

And so, when the bruised and battered bully began to rally from that extraordinary experience, he found himself cared for by friends of like calibre, who were fairly hustling him away from the spot upon which he had fallen, hardly a bed of roses, either!

Curly Rebb was scarcely fit for making any vigorous resistance and almost before he could comprehend just "how came ye so," his chums had taken him out of sight and hearing of the At Home.

Then there was a bit of by-play, during which the bully raged and fumed, vowing that he would mop up the very earth with that infernal dude; but his struggles were by no means as desperate as while in the Velvet Sport's grip, and the ending was pretty much what might have been expected.

"That's all right, cully," said one of his chums, in a voice which Eula Piercy might possibly have recognized had it come within range of her pretty ears. "We're jest as hot ag'inst the blame critter as you dast to be, an' when the right time comes 'round—"

"I had it then!" hoarsely growled the battered knave, sullenly yielding to their friendly force and staggering like one nearly drunken as he moved away between the pair. "I'd have cut his black heart out, only for—devil baste the woman, anyway!"

"Don't let the boss hear you talk that-a-way, pardy," said the second good samaritan, with a low chuckle at the vision thus conjured up.

"Curse the boss! Curse the woman! Curse everybody an' everythin' on top of let me go, an' I'll carve that dude until let up, I say, you houn'-pups!"

Again the struggle made was brief and

clearly more in the nature of a salve to his own pride than pure business. And once again Curly Rebb was hustled on through the night by his pals.

No further halt was made by the trio of jail-birds until a rudely dilapidated shanty was gained, which stood at the outskirts of Frisky Flat.

Entering this rude refuge, which was all the better calculated to suit their purpose than a building located in a more frequented region, one of the chums struck a match with which he lit a candle stuck into the mouth of an empty whisky bottle.

By this none too steady or brilliant light the faces and figures of the trio were fairly distinct to view, and after closing the shackly door to shut off the rays of their one candle, the good samaritans found seats upon empty boxes near the dirty-topped table, made from broken-up dry goods receptacles.

With the candle standing between them, the fellows talked in lowered tones, while Curly Rebb gradually sobered off.

Everything about the humiliated bully went to show that he had sought comfort in the guise of strong waters, and that he had been in a state of at least partial intoxication when he made that savage assault upon his two-time victor, the Velvet Dude.

And so in part his two chums strove to soothe if not comfort their dilapidated pard, but little of real interest being said during the earlier portion of that companionship.

Still, a certain degree of interest attached to that union, if only for the singular fact that these same two all-alive fellows had been distinctly reported as dead!

For one was known throughout that section as Ike Brooks, while his less muscular comrade was localized as Alf Dipperling; the identical brace of rascals whom Kent Kerlin overthrew in his might, afar out in yonder hills on the night following that sensational hold-up!

Rather queerly, perhaps, Curly Rebb seemed fairly well posted as to the past, and his fierce rage against the Sport in Velvet was by no means lessened when one or other of his present companions alluded to the prominent part the dude had played since first making his debut in the Frisky Flat region.

"Curses cover him a mile deep!" vigorously vowed the bully, fetching that lead-peppered fist to table with a mighty thump, then holding the swollen member up as a spectacle to his own eyes. "He's bin a hoodoo to the hull gang ever sence he put in sight! An' now—ef I don't chaw him up like—"

"Like you done a'ready, Curly?" cynically cut in Brooks.

Another flood of oaths and foul epithets, then again:

"I'll do it, shore! I've jest got to down him—or skip town! An' the rest o' you fellers hain't a durned bit better off, nuther!"

"How do you make that come out, pardy?"

"Be ye? Be ye? I say he's a cussed hoodoo, an' none o' the outfit kin look fer 'nother bit o' good luck ontel he's croaked; an' his wind shet off so mighty shore thar cain't come no back-kick, nuther!"

Alf Dipperling was content to wait for a fit opening, but he recognized one right now, so cut in with the coolly cynical speech:

"That's all right, pardy, an' sounds like mighty good stuff. You jest lay fer the blame' dude, but—take my advice, Curly; don't try it on ag'in when pritty nigh the pick o' the Flat is lookin' on."

"I'll croak him ef I hang fer it!"

"Which you'll shorely do ef you do. An' so I say it over, Curly; lay fer the critter an' croak him, but don't try it on whar the crowd kin see, nur yit whar he kin git a squar' squint at ye afore the job is full-jbbbed."

"Do ye reckon I'm skeered o' him?"

"Waal, I would be ef I'd bin in your place this same day," bluntly avowed

Dipperling; then speaking on with change of tones: "He's a pritty painted devil on ten wheels; he is!"

"An' so much the wuss fer us, don't you see?" muttered Brooks, brows blacker than nature intended, and big paws fumbling at the weapons girted about his middle. "He's wuss then ary devil I ever clapped my two peepers onto, an' when I git right down to sober thinkin'—waal, I'm gittin' mighty nigh in seventeen minds fer to rack out o' this yer part o' the kentry; yas, I be, now, fer a scandalous fact!"

"Here the same medicine," curtly assured Dipperling.

Curly Rebb cursed and raged, smiting table with fists as though he had face of enemy pinned right there, wholly at his mercy.

And then he repeated much of his former tirade, vowing vengeance most dire upon the Velvet Sport, who had so thoroughly accomplished his downfall, while so doing exposing more of an evil record than he would have dared do with less congenial chums.

Those two knaves interchanged meaning glances during this ugly exhibition, and when Curly wound up by vowing that he'd never shift quarters until after settling in full with that devil in frills, Dipperling gave shrug to shoulders, then spoke:

"Waal, now, pardy, I wouldn't mind payin' off old scores my own self, so fur's all that goes; eh, lkey, lad?"

"You bet yer sweet life!"

There was something far from commonplace in manner, if not in words, and in spite of his battered state of mind and body, Curly Rebb was keen enough to recognize as much.

He leaned a bit more toward the fellows, gazing as steadily as he could manage into one face after the other, then blurted forth:

"What're you tryin' to git through ye now, anyway, boys?"

"Talkin' 'bout how much good it'd feel fer to pay off old scores an' make a fresh start; that's all," answered Dipperling, with shrewd grin and cunning chuckle.

"An' when that same settlin' up was shore to fetch a mighty snug chunk o' solid dough this yer way; eh, pardy?"

"Sure!"

"Look yer, boys, you mean somethin' more'n you've dast to say, as yit," doggedly spoke the battered pugilist. "Now—out with it in a bald-headed lump, cuss ye both!"

"Be ye sober 'nough fer to button up what ye may hear, even ef ye don't jest hone fer to chip in ary sech deal, Curly?" cautiously asked the wiry member of the sinners, leaning a bit further across the table between them.

"Hev I ever yit went back onto ye, boys?" demanded Rebb.

"No, or you wouldn't be squattin' right whar you now be," bluntly declared Brooks; then nodding toward his mate, to add: "Go on, Alf. Open 'er up, anyhow. Ef he don't chip, Curly won't kick the skillet over."

"Waal, Curly, what d'ye reckon 'bout the boss freezin' fast to that hull boodle; hey?"

"What? Waal, won't thar be a squar' divvy made atwixt us all?"

"When?" swiftly interjected Dipperling, his wrinkled visage curling tighter in a vicious grin that betrayed his uneven, tobacco-stained teeth, after a far from agreeable fashion.

"You shorely cain't think—what ye drivin' at, pardner?"

"Hain't it plain 'nough fer even a blind critter to see?" sharply demanded Dipperling, now plainly in bitter earnest as he added: "He's got the dingbats, while we've got the—kicks an' cusses!"

"An' other good lads has got even wuss then either," gloomily supplemented Brooks. "Thar's Jimmy, an' Danny—"

"Drop that, curse ye!" viciously growled Rebb, casting an involuntary glance over a shoulder.

Then, rallying, the thug spoke in harsh and savage tones:

"Shet up, you devil! I kin see that face jest as it was when—an' you must fetch it all back when—ha!" he cried, loudly, springing to his feet and jerking forth a revolver from his belt, while glaring madly around. "What was that—who is—listen, ye devils!"

CHAPTER XXI.

ALF DIPPERLING DEALS IN HINTS.

A curious sound seemed to float through the air, coming from none could tell just whence; a sound more like the hollow groan of dying human than aught else the startled trio could think of.

Almost hideous Curly Rebb looked just then, standing at bay with drawn weapons, bloodshot eyes glaring around apprehensively, his cut and bruised face fairly livid with angry affright.

That sound was short-lived, not lasting long enough for even the cooler-headed, clearer-witted brace of knaves to make fair location; but as no more open demonstration followed, Alf Dipperling gave gritty mutter for his comrade:

"Hunt fer dirty play, pardy! You take right, I'll go left. Croak ary critter you smoke—quicker!"

Cat-like in his swiftness of action, the self-confessed road-agent sprung to door, flinging it wide open, then darting forth with arms in readiness for ugly work in case of discovery; and close upon his heels followed burly Brooks.

The thugs separated at the threshold, each taking a different line of search, making sure that no living enemy was lurking nigh their rude refuge.

And so, for something like five minutes, each one as long as an ordinary hour, Curly Rebb remained alone with his superstitious fears, crouching on guard, revolver cocked, and pistol-arm steadied by being grasped with his muscular left hand.

And Alf Dipperling ducked head right smartly as he entered, finding himself stared full in the face by that business-like muzzle.

"Putt 'er up, ye blame' fool!" he cried, angrily, ducking almost to the floor in the swift effort to get out of that dangerous line. "Cain't ye see that—eh?"

"Oh! it's you, Dip?"

"That's what! An' I'll dip a tunnel clean through you, Curly, ef ye don't come to senses afore—what's gwine all over ye, anyhow, boy?"

"Who was it? What'd ye see out thar?" hoarsely demanded the scared assassin, eyes still on the alert, muscular frame all a-quiver. "It wasn't—you didn't see—not him?"

Ike Brooks gave a snort of disgust as he likewise returned from that vain quest; but Dipperling was a bit more considerate, and producing a fair-sized flask from a rear pocket, he drew the cork and held out the bottle, giving its contents a significant shake.

With all the greed of a confirmed drunkard, who found himself fairly at the boundary line of tremens, Rebb caught the flask and glued his lips there, swallowing with a hungry gurgle until Dipperling fairly tore the flask away from his grip.

"That's it—that hits me right whar—who was it made that noise, pards?"

"Jest a sort o' growlin' of the timbers in the ruff, I reckon," answered Dipperling, with real or well-assumed indifference. "Anyhow, we couldn't find any livin' body out yender; eh, pardy?"

"Nur smell a spook, nuther," declared Brooks.

"Don't!" and again that bruised face turned paler, those bloodshot eyes flashed an apprehensive glance around. "Ef I thought—ef I didn't know thar hain't no sech thing as ghosts or—burr-r-r-h!"

He shivered violently, giving himself a shake as though thinking to thus cast off all unmanly dread; and in good part his attempt proved successful.

The other rascals stared at Rebb in curious surprise, plainly at a loss how to understand such queer sensitiveness.

Dipperling laughed, sardonically, then

resumed his seat at table, speaking as he did so:

"Waal, Curly, ef I ever 'lowed fer to see you stirred up all of a nasty mux jest 'count of—didn't you ever croak a critter afore?"

"Yes, but—not jest like this 'ne!" answered the thug, in low, husky tones, flashing uneasy glances around as he likewise took seat again. "I never knowed—devil scorch the houn'-pup as made me turn sech a cowardly trick, anyway!"

"Which thar wasn't big 'nough money into fer him own self to do the nasty business," gruffly insinuated burly Brooks.

"An' that comes mighty nigh fetchin' us back to whar we was jest afo' them creakin' timbers sot us afire, pardy," declared Dipperling, a meaning look passing between himself and mate. "An' so—what do you think of it, anyway, Curly?"

"Think o' what?"

"The way matters is runnin' on—like all these!" with an angry gesture. "We doin' all of the dirty devil's work, an' them jest a-rarin' back onto thar dignity an' swipin' in all the good; hey?"

"That's what!"

Again Rebb's curiosity was awakened, and for a brief space he searched first one face and then the other, striving all he knew how to read therein the whole truth.

Apparently he was considered sufficiently primed by now, for Alf Dipperling threw off the half-disguise which he had so far maintained, speaking more openly and to the point.

"It's jest like this, Curly, an' I don't reckon you kin come to the solid truth of it all ary too sudden, nuther! Divvy, is it? Waal, ef you live ontel that day comes 'round, ole Methusalum wouldn't be in it!"

"Hey?"

"That's what! Fer why, mebbe you'll ax? Waal, fer jest this much: the boss says the hull blame boodle was bank stuff, an' so—"

"The —! But he said we was to hev a full share out of it?"

"Ef he said it afore, he shore don't say it now," decisively declared Dipperling, showing teeth in a vicious grin as he nodded head emphatically. "An' so I'm tellin' of ye, Curly; he gits the rocks, while we pore, low-down whelps ketches the cusses an' the kicks an'—like pore Dan Furlong!"

"Drap that—drap that, durn ye!" huskily muttered the bruised and battered bully, with a savage gesture.

"Waal, it cain't do no harm fer to jest keep all sech nasty p'int in mind, pardy," coolly explained Alfred, clearly well content with the manner in which his gradually broadening hints were being received.

"Nur we didn't come off much slicker, nuther," declared Brooks, with surly shake of head and grip of fist. "Jest look at the way, will ye?"

"We playin' the blamdest sort 'o chumps afore the gal, an' him jest pillin' up the red fire to make out he was a little angel on ten wheels, kivered from top to toe with gilt an' spangles!"

"An' what hev we got fer it all?"

"Not a blame red cent up to this hour! An' you, Curly; how many yaller-boys hes bin loaded into your wagon?"

Rebb shook his head reluctantly. He was beginning to share those sentiments, yet hardly ripe for actual rebellion against those whom he weld were in authority over them all.

Alf Dipperling cast a wary glance around those rude quarters, as though to make sure no other ears could catch hint or sound, then leaned toward the battered pugilist, speaking rapidly:

"It's pritty much like this, pardy. Hyar we've bin takin' all the resk, doin' all the dirty jobbery, an' through it all hevin' our work fer our pay.

"F'r instance, take this yer sweet-scented trick which Ikey an' me was

made fer to work off; didn't we run a powerful heap o' resk jest beca'se he reckoned it'd pan out mo' like a play-piece?"

"You jest bet yer life!"

"The gal seed us both, 'thout no face-kiver. The young squirt would hev it come out jest that-a-way, ye know! An' to make it all the mo' bindin', what shed the pesky critter do but blatt out our names, too durn loud fer ary sort o' use!"

"He never didn't shorely?"

"Waal, he did jest that," vigorously vowed Dipperling. "An' now, ef the gal was to hear them names, or was to see ary one o' our pritty mugs hyar in town, wouldn't she squeal out too loud fer ary sort o' use?"

"An' we cain't well help meetin' up with the gal, sometime, ef we all stop at the Flat; don't ye see?" contributed Brooks.

"It'd be ugly fer a fact!" admitted Rebb.

"It'd be wuss'n that ef she was to spot us an' blow the gaff. Ole Piercy is a tough nut to crack once you gits him well a-gwine, an' that blame Devil's Dump fizzle hes sot the hull town turrible solid ag'inst all them as mought be mixed up into the job."

"Nur Fred Granger hain't so mighty much better when it gets down to solid business, ye want to know!"

"Granger? What's he got to do with it, I'd like to know?"

"Heap sight mo' then Kent Kerlin fancies, an' don't ye forgit jest that, pardy!" vigorously spoke Dipperling, head nodding swiftly. "He's got the inside track 'long of the gal, an' ef she was to p'int us out as the coves what played dog out yender—waal, thar'd be 'nother nasty critter in the rumpus!"

"Is that so?"

"You bet she jest am, though Kerlin hain't jest ketched onto the hull combination as yit, I reckon," more equably spoke Dipperling.

"Then how did you find out so mighty much, Alf?"

"By my smartness, of course," with a short laugh. "An' when I say so much, you kin jest bet yer sweet life it's so! It's a solid case o' 'you're my honey, I'm your peach!' with Fred an' the Piercy gal."

"All o' which hain't got a blame thing to do with what we sot out fer to talk over," surlily objected Brooks.

"That's right, too! An' now that Curly hes sort o' ketched back his equal—Abraham once mo'—you hev, hain't ye, pardy?"

"If you mean that I'm gone drunk—"

"Waal, not quite so bad as that, Curly, but you was—eh?"

Again the battered bully, whose ears seemed rendered all the more sensitive from his recent experience, showed signs of alarm; and himself catching certain sounds coming from without the shanty, Alf Dipperling sprung erect with revolver flashing into view, sharply crying out:

"Who're you? Sing true an' quick or I'll make an angel out o' ye?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SHIELD.

"Save your shells, hot-head!" came the stern response to this grim challenge, and as that muzzle lifted in token of recognition, Kent Kerlin made his appearance in the doorway as the rude barrier swung open under his touch.

The young man looked unusually pale and stern as to visage, but he gave a little nod of recognition as he stepped inside the shanty, one heel kicking the door to behind him.

The trio of knaves were all afoot, and gave silent greeting to one whom they in a measure deemed a master; but something in their bearing served to warn Kent Kerlin that diplomacy would serve him better here than bluff demands.

His expression changed as by magic,

and his smile was fairly sunshiny as he came forward, hand extended in cordial greeting.

"I'm in luck; great good luck!" he declared, while shaking hands with the trio in succession. "I hoped to find at least one of you here, but all three; that was too much to expect for a cent!"

"Waal, now, don't ye know?" drawled Dipperling, eyes nearly closed but glittering all the more keenly for that. "Talkin' 'bout cents makes me think I hain't seed one dollar kiss another fer so long I couldn't begin fer to reckomember jest when!"

"Me too!" chimed in burly Brooks.

Curly Rebb was silent, but a touch of covetousness showed in his reddened eyes as he saw one hand slipping into pocket before Kent Kerlin made reply to those delicate hints.

"Well, lads, payday is not far away, and until then—I'm hardly flush myself, but so long as I have a dollar one-half of it belongs to my friends."

With this preamble, Kerlin produced a small roll of bills, selecting several, tossing them upon the table, where they were swiftly appropriated by Alf Dipperling.

"We'll make a divvy later on, pards. Fer now—what is it, boss?"

A flush came to Kerlin's face at this blunt demand.

Scoundrel though he undoubtedly was, he preferred wearing a mask, no matter how flimsy the disguise, even while in company with those who knew him thoroughly for what he was, not for what he seemed.

Still, he had a certain object to gain, and until that particular point was won, he deemed it the part of ordinary prudence to pocket what might otherwise have been resented as insolence.

After that first show of cupidity, Curly Rebb relapsed, slowly moving across the room to lean moodily against the rear wall, arms folded and head bowed until chin touched chest.

A surly, sullen, repulsive object, just then, and Kent Kerlin frowned in spite of his resolve to make himself agreeable as his eyes took note of man and manner.

Perhaps it was just as well for both that this frown was not followed by speech.

Curly Rebb was in a dangerous mood, just then, his nerves sufficiently unstrung by superstitious fears to render him dangerous as a rattlesnake in sloughing-time; and feeling as he did that much of his more recent troubles found root in Kerlin's cupidity or craft, any rude address from one of that ilk might easily have led up to another tragedy.

Whether or no he divined something of this, Kent Kerlin paid the scarred pugilist no further notice, confining his attentions mainly to Alfred Dipperling, with an occasional word or look for Brooks.

Although this model young man had maliciously sought to waken the green-eyed monster within the breast of his father, he was poorly prepared to repel a shaft of that same description; and now, as a result of those few keenly-cutting words, Kent was smarting as if from a flesh-bath of rank nettles.

Although he never for an instant doubted the complete fidelity of these knaves to his peculiar interests, Kerlin found it no easy matter to fairly break the ice and make known his object in paying that visit to the rude shanty.

He beat about the bush for some little time, making casual mention of recent incidents, but at length he came to his actual purpose, speaking to Dipperling in feigned carelessness:

"You are acquainted with a fellow called Granger, aren't you, Dipperling?"

"The youngster who's got a claim he calls the Hope On, boss?"

"Yes, Fred Granger. Well, now, what do you think of him, anyway?"

The wiry rascal paused as though for reflection before making reply, but there

was a malicious sparkle in his diminutive eyes as he finally spoke:

"Waal, now, sense you ax it, boss, I'll tell ye pritty much like this yere: Ef all's to come true as seems true, then I do reckon we're gwine fer to hev a he-ole weddin' 'round our parts afore many days!"

"What!"

"That's no lie, neither, boss! You hain't in it, so fur's Freddy boy an' the Piercy gal is mixed up; no you hain't, now!"

A rather risky card to play with one so fierce and fiery for an opposite, but Dipperling lacked little when it came to shrewd judgment, and the outcome proved he had not made a mistake on this occasion.

Kent Kerlin gave oath and savage gesture, but both were directed toward one named though not present.

"That's where your're talking more like idiot than wise man, Dipperling. So far from there being show for wedding, 'twill pan out a funeral rather!"

"Is that so?"

"You bet your life that's so!" emphasized the younger Kerlin, with nod and gesture to suit his word. "And it ought to be so, too! Fred Granger totes too mighty sharp a nose ahead of his face, and is too infernally fond of poking it into other people's business to stay in perfect health much longer. You catch on, lads?"

Brooks gave a surly grunt, but Alfred smiled shrewdly before making any audible reply.

"Waal, boss, I reckon you kin do the dumpin' act right up in shape, ef so be the notion ever hits ye strong enough."

Kent Kerlin frowned at this speech, so different from what he anticipated or desired. As a rule, Dipperling was swift to take a hint, but on this particular occasion he seemed unusually obtuse.

"Of course, I could down the fellow—"

"Jest like a mice, boss!"

"But that isn't the only point to be taken under consideration, can't you comprehend, lads?"

"Which is jest what, boss?"

"I mean that while I hold myself good enough to lay Fred Granger out for keeps, it wouldn't do—wouldn't do at all!"

"Neck too pesky ticklish, boss?"

"No. Of course, I'd take care to make it show fair and square on the surface. That isn't what bothers, but—think of the girl!"

"The Piercy gal?"

"Sure! Of course, I don't take any stock in your foolish notion that there's anything more than a passing acquaintance between them, Dipperling; indeed, I may say that I know there isn't. But, can't you understand? If I was to be mixed up in such a street fight with Granger, there'd be some fool friend to insinuate to the girl that the row was on her account."

"Which it wouldn't be, of course?" with a half-sneer.

"Of course not. Still, it might make worse trouble, and so—you fellows want to put heads together and cipher out just how you can best croak the cuss with out an after clap-clap. See?"

The chums interchanged glances, then Brooks nodded, and Dipperling slowly pulled pockets wrong side outward, grinning into the face of their evil tempter as he did this.

As a wordless explanation that action proved a complete success, and, flushing hotly, Kent Kerlin shoved hand into his own pocket, producing what was left of that small roll of money, speaking as he tossed the bills to table between the comrades:

"You turn the trick in good shape, boys, and I'll make it all right in the end. For just now—of course, that's only part pay, but just now I'm awkwardly short myself and—"

"Then that hunk o' boodle we pinched top o' the Devil's Dump was jest green

goods, boss?" coolly asked Dipperling, eyes a-sparkling as they were riveted upon that darkly handsome countenance.

"Of course not; but I haven't a finger in that pie, as you ought to know by this time. As for the old gent—well, that's between you and him, while for now—will you do Granger up?"

The two thugs put their heads together, speaking in low whispers for a few moments, while Kerlin looked impatiently on.

Presently, as though their decision was firmly formed, Alfred Dipperling spoke for both:

"Waal, boss, that depends on jest what ye wants. We're open to give the critter a solid ole thumpin', but no croaking in ours this time!"

"Fer rope is too durned cheap in Frisky Flat, an' hangin' never did seem to 'gree with my constitution," grimly supplied the burly Brooks.

"We'll 'gree to lay the lad up in lavender, of course, boss," added the wiry member of that evil combination. "Will that do ye?"

It needed no second glance at that darkly frowning face to answer in the negative, but feeling that he could make no better terms, Kent Kerlin yielded to what could not be helped, curtly speaking:

"Well, do the job, boys. Only bear in mind that I'll pay according to the work that is done, and that I reserve the right to judge. And, above all else, my name is not to be mixed up in the case. I must be so I can show a clear record when the job comes off."

After a few more words passed from master to man, Kent Kerlin turned away and left the shanty, Dipperling watching him until he vanished from view, then turning back to smite table with clenched fist as he harshly spoke:

"Waal, of all the measly frauds I ever run up ag'in, he takes the cake! He's wuss then the old man—and that's needless!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

PLAINER SPEECH FROM ALFRED.

Curly Rebb added a bit of pantomime which was even more significant, right hand fumbling at the empty sheath in search of the knife which was even then on exhibition in the gambling department of At Home, point deep sunken in the ceiling, whither it had been flung by the iron grip of the Velvet Dude.

Failing this familiar weapon, the battered thug caught up a splinter of wood which chanced to be lying on the floor near his feet, striding to the table and there striking viciously, as though at exposed heart of his deadliest enemy.

Alf Dipperling watched this action with keen interest, then broke into chuckling approval as he spoke:

"That fer the old man, Curly? Waal, ef we hain't three kids with a honest taste fer the same brand o' milk, then I wouldn't say so! Eh, Ike?"

"You bet yer sweet life, pardy!"

At the same time the burly knave crossed over to the door for a final look outside, his actions plainly betraying the fact that something was in the wind which neither of the Kerlins ought to catch an inkling of, prematurely.

To all seeming there was nothing to fear from eavesdroppers.

Kent Kerlin had walked swiftly away, and no other person was to be spotted in that locality.

Ike Brooks made a report to this effect, and then Dipperling once more touched upon the important business which those two rascals had in view even before picking up the half-stunned pugilist.

"That's a pritty fa'r-sized snort left in me jug, Curly," he said, generously, at the same time tipping his burly mate a wink which needed no wordy interpretation. "Soak 'er up, pardy, an' meb-be it'll help ye over ontel Ikey kin scratch up 'nother box o' dope."

Curly Rebb was not at all backward

about taking hold, and as he lowered the now empty flask from his lips, he beheld Brooks coming from a dark corner with a fresh supply of whisky.

One more suspicious than the assassin might have scented a trap in this liberality, but just then Rebb felt sorely in need of some such stimulant, and required no urging to drink freely of what was provided.

Meanwhile Alf Dipperling was singing the glories of days gone by when other climes and other scenes claimed the honor of his allegiance.

"Aha, me lads, but those were the days, those were the times! Plenty of rich pickin' without takin' thought of guns at every turn and crook in the road! Those the nights when the sun might set on a cove without the price of a drink in his kicks, only to wake up for a peep at a bloated bondholder an' banker—no less!"

A grim bit of pantomime served to make this statement clear to the half-drunken knave he was speaking for, and Curly Rebb joined freely in the humorous chuckle which followed.

"An' that's what's the matter atwixt the two places; back east, or even over the big briny, thar's more solid rocks, gayer gals, an' not nigh so many bloomin' guns fer to bark jest the wrong time, don't ye know?"

"That may be all right enough, Alf, me kid," knowingly cut in the assassin, with nod and wink. "But heap more time fer to play checkers with yer nose; eh, pard?"

"Ef a feller's a bloomin' chump 'nough fer to let himself get ketched, of course," admitted Dipperling, with a fine show of frankness. "But take a look at the other side o' the pictur, pardy; jest try fer to 'magine what sort o' heaven a critter'd be up to the neck inside of ef he was able to go back thar well heeled. Ef he hed solid rocks to throw at the dogs as they bark o' nights?"

"An' kiver them same gay girly-girls all over with frills, don't ye mind, now?" supplemented Brooks, smacking his thick lips.

Curly Rebb looked from man to man with eyes which were still indicative of native shrewdness, in spite of all the bad liquor he had been pouring down in vain hopes of banishing for all time those haunting phantoms, prominent among which was the death-distorted face of a former friend and comrade, whose wrinkled forehead now bore the livid patch which represents a bullet-hole.

Then he grinned sardonically, saying:

"That's all right, pards, but I hain't bankin' a durn on what ye say; what is it ye mean?"

A quick glance was exchanged by the schemers, then Dipperling gave a nod as of final decision, saying to his more sluggish fellow:

"Curly's all right, pardy, an' so we might as well—eh?"

"All right goes, then. You kin do the talkin', boy."

Rebb was reaching for the nearly drained bottle just then, but his hand was foiled by Dipperling, who gripped those cut and swollen fingers tightly, forcing their owner to meet his burning gaze fairly and squarely once more.

Giving a curt nod at what he read in those enflamed orbs, the wiry rascal spoke in lowered tones, yet making each word count:

"Ef we didn't know ye better, pardy, I'd feel like givin' ye a kick-out right now as wuss then no good. You seem all broke up over this yer crooked deal with the Velvet Sport—"

"I'll eat his heart raw, you se'f I don't, now!"

"That's all right, Curly, but ef a fr'ind was too offer ye a mighty sight richer meal nor that?"

"Ye mean somethin'; what is it, blame ye?"

"Jest this much; I mean that we've bin playing cat to the old man's monkey from start to wind-up! I mean that Ker-

lin hes got all the rocks, leavin' all the kicks to us! I mean that—listen, Curly!

"Roger Kerlin hasn't made no divvy as yit, nur he don't mean to do anything o' the sort, nuther!"

"But he swore—"

"To a lie, jest as he's done swore to the same thing times past countin' afore this," sternly cut in the road-agent. "An' so I say: ef we're sot down to be cheated out o' this bit o' pie, jest as we hev bin out o' t'other puddin', who's to blame fer it all but our own selves?"

"An' that's what's the matter!" gruffly declared burly Brooks.

"Now, thar's the bank. Heaps o' good chink a-layin' right in thar, don't ye reckon, Curly?"

"Blame sight more then we'll ever be able fer to draw out, anyway!" surlily declared Rebb.

"Who says so?"

"What? I don't—spit 'er out, blame ye, Dip!"

"Who says we cain't ever draw it all out o' the bank?" deliberately repeated the wiry member of that conclave.

"I say we jest kin!" declared Brooks, doggedly.

Curly Rebb gave a little start as a ray of light seemed to dawn upon his whiskey-befogged brain, but then he fairly snorted with scorn at the reckless idea.

"Huh! Heap sight o' fun thar'd be in that, now wouldn't they?"

"Why not, pardy?"

"Why not? You jest make a flyer that way an' see—or feel, ruther! The hull town'd be up on the jump, an' we'd be turned to sand-sifters long afore we could close hooks on a single one o' them piles of rocks; that's why not!"

Instead of showing conviction Alfred chuckled, irritatingly, then waved hand in patronizing manner as he made reply:

"That's the way you look at it, eh, Curly?"

"Why wouldn't I, then? An' it's the right way, too! We couldn't git even one huff onto the doorstep afore all the Flat was pilin' onto us; an' them as croaked in the mix, would be jest so fur ahead o' them as mought be tuck with life 'nough left fer to climb a tree—at the wrong eend of a rope!"

Ike Brooks broke into a hoarse laugh, while Dipperling showed his ugly teeth in an uglier grin.

Then the trio drew heads a bit more closely together, while the lesser knave in size, but larger devil in wit and audacity, spoke in low and guarded tones:

"That's the sort o' game you're most used to, Curly, but mine is like this: I kin crack that blessed crib an' rake in every dollar she holds 'thout wakin' up a sleepin' mouse in the next room!"

"How! Show me how ye kin do all that?" eagerly demanded Rebb.

But Dipperling drew back a bit, shaking head as he made answer:

"Not jest now, pardy, ef ye please! You've bin swillin' too mighty free this night, but it kin be done, an' it shell be done, ef you 'gree to take your sheer o' the work an' the boodle. How is that, pardy?"

For answer Rebb extended a hand, and the three knaves formed a triangular pledge about that dirty table by the dim candle-light.

This pledge, duly ratified by a drink from the black bottle, Dipperling entered a little more into details, which scarcely need be put on record here.

Before all was said and done, Curly Rebb was fairly committed to the audacious scheme, his latest doubts settled when Dipperling said:

"We kin turn the trick an' skip out long afore day, once we start. An' then, even ef the old man suspects the truth, what matter? He won't dast to squeal, fer we know jest as bad 'bout him; see?"

Now, Curly Rebb was eager to waste no further time over the matter, urging his allies on to do the job that same night; but Dipperling positively refused, saying bluntly:

"No, pardy; you're too mighty nigh drunk right now. We'll let ye know in

plenty time fer to git a good ready on. Ontel then—waal, now, old boy, better you go bunk in somewhar's an' see ef ye cain't sleep the bad whisky clean off!"

Curly made little objection to this plan, and soon took his departure, heading for his own quarters, leaving Brooks and Dipperling to themselves for the time being.

But the half-drunken assassin was fated to meet with another ugly experience that same night, for ere he was nearly home, he tripped over something, to fall heavily, then feel hands upon throat and knee on chest to pin him fast to earth, while a hoarse, sepulchral voice came to his ear.

"Repent, Curly Rebb; repent, for 'tis your time to die this night!"

"Who—who're you?" the frightened varlet managed to gasp.

"Dan Furlong, the pard you murdered while he was—"

With a hoarse screech the assassin lost his senses.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SPORT SEES FAIR PLAY.

Thanks to the drift taken by affairs at Frisky Flat, but little has been said concerning Fred Granger, and even less seen of him by the reader; yet the young fellow certainly was far more worthy extended notice than many of those to whom prominence has necessarily been given.

A frank, manly, honest young fellow who was resolved to make his own way through the world, and who, after many weeks and even months of discouraging failure, at last gave evidence of gaining the high mark which he had been aiming at from the start.

Through all disappointments Granger held firm faith in his mining claim, the "Hope On," and while at times forced to work at days' wages in order to get cash for pressing that development, a bright future was now almost assured, and rich offers were being made for the claim outright.

There was more than mere wealth at stake, according to the view Fred Granger took of this matter; as a poor miner, working for low wages, he would scarcely dare raise his eyes so high as the pinnacle upon which Eula Piercy stood; but as owner of a paying mine—eureka!

And so 'twas with light heart and springy steps that Fred Granger pressed on through town on business bent, this forenoon succeeding that little seance at the faro table, over whose destinies Lady Leota presided with such charming grace.

Nothing was further from his mind than trouble with any of his fellow-citizens, yet just such trouble had been brewing, and was now ready to break over his devoted head.

Reeling and lurching like men who had been up early to hit the bottle hard, Alf Dipperling and his burly chum abruptly crossed the young miner's path, clearly bent on earning the money paid them in advance by a jealous rival.

This was done so adroitly that Granger could not wholly avoid a rude jostle, for which an honest apology was rising to his lips, when Ike Brooks gave savage oath, and struck heavily at their intended victim, at the same time growling forth:

"Trample all over a man's pet corn-field, will ye, critter?"

"I never—hold on!" sharply cried Granger, ducking to avoid that wicked blow, but taken so completely by surprise that he was only in part successful.

If it had been but man to man, even then the stalwart miner would more than likely have held his end level, but Alf Dipperling was coming to the front, bent on performing his part of that evil contract.

Thus Granger found himself fairly double-banked by a brace of awkward customers to treat with, and that so suddenly that only one man within eye-range was keen enough to get at the actual facts of the case.

As nearly always seems to be the case,

a pretty good-sized crowd was gathered in marvelously brief time, some cheering the fight on, others crying out against such uneven odds, yet not one of these sticklers for fair play taking steps to enforce that universal rule.

As stated, only one man saw just how that sudden row found birth, but that man proved to be a host in one, for the Velvet Dude split the crowd as by magic, and leaping to the front, cried aloud, in clear, ringing tones:

"Fair play's a jewel beyond price, and so—dance to my sweet music, please, lkey Brooks!"

One white hand gripped shoulder and jerked the burly ruffian back as though he were but a man of straw, then whirled him about to come face to face, laughing right merrily at that savage scowl as his open palm smote first one cheek then its mate with a force which brought tears to eyes and left their impress in stinging scarlet.

"Two on one is foul, but man to man is just enough to make the average crowd rear up on its hind legs and howl glory to the ram!" cried the Sport in Velvet, laughing at his burly aversary the while.

This was scarcely what Brooks had calculated upon, but those smarting brands drove all else from his mind, and with a savage howl of fury he plunged forward, striking out with heavy fists as he came.

But he had a master of that art in opposition now, and those blows failed to connect, that smiling face being elsewhere even more swiftly; and then, with two straightly developed strokes the ruffian was driven back still further from his surprised pal, and a deftly manipulated foot caused that blind stagger to become a crushing fall.

It all happened in a single breath, as it were, and almost before those looking on could take note of what was happening, Brooks was lying flat upon his stomach with a heavy foot in patent leather pressed across his neck, while the Velvet Dude with careless grace handled a brace of revolvers as he ringingly spoke to all in general:

"Fair play is a jewel, gentlemen, and just now I'm acting as its prophet. Go easy, all! When Mr. Granger gets through thrashing that runt, then he can take this bloat in hand. Until then—touch lightly!"

Probably the worst surprised of all those intimately concerned in this little affair was Alfred Dipperling, Esquire.

Although averse to risking the rope as administered by Judge Lynch and an open-court jury by actually murdering young Granger as wished by Kent Kerlin, that foxy-faced sinner was willing enough to earn the reward pledged for crippling the owner of the Hope On.

He arranged matters so that it seemed his dastardly work might be brought off before the crowd could possibly spot those most to blame in the row; but now—matters looked mightily different.

Granger was athletic, steel-sinewed through plenty of work, and by no means a novice with his fists. At any time he could be counted on to give any average man a more than fair argument after that fashion; and right now Dipperling felt himself heavily handicapped by feeling that the Sport in Velvet had him lined, ready to kill or to cripple at his first attempt to draw or make use of a deadly weapon.

In fact, such was the intimation cheerfully given by Verne as he downed burly Brooks, then glanced toward the other couple.

"Man to man, fist to fist, and let the better come out on top! I'd hate to end all with a funeral, sports, but—ware guns and knives!"

"I don't need any!" cried back Granger, his fist landing with good effect an instant after a heavy blow partially beat down Dipperling's guard. "You cowardly cur; yelp for mercy, or I'll beat your face in!"

Under different circumstances Dipperling might have led Frederick a merry little dance, overmatched though he was in size and weight; but that uncomfortable feeling of having a revolver muzzle following one's every motion is enough to take the starch out of an average backbone, and just so it proved to be on this occasion.

Some of those in the gathering gave surly murmurs when they saw the wiry fox losing ground, and a few ugly words were hurled toward the Sport in Velvet himself.

"Tend to your knittin', stranger, an' let the kids settle it atwixt 'emselves, 'cording to law an' gospel!" cried one dark-faced fellow on the outskirts.

"Do him up, Ikey!" recklessly advised another to the prostrate ruffian, who seemed too nearly stunned by blows and fall to do more than feebly resist that cruel pressure upon his neck.

"Ikey's weary, and vastly prefers taking a little siesta to undergoing fresh exertions this oppressive day," glibly retorted the Dude in Velvet, cool as confidence itself. "As for the kids, as you call them, I fancy Granger is doing—all and more than Alfred desires, already!"

And so it really appeared, for that double-banking had failed, and both the thugs were getting decidedly the worst of the deal.

Blood was already marking that foxy face, and it seemed only a matter of time and ability to withstand heavy punishment on the part of Dipperling, as to when the knock-out blow should be administered.

Then Granger sent in a particularly hot one, before which his adversary went down, all in a heap, yet lifting head almost instantly, to cry out in harshly-strained tones:

"Flag o' truce, critter!"

"That settles it, then," declared Granger, bluntly, adding as he turned in scorn from that defeated knave toward Ike Brooks and his present guardian: "Let the rascal up, stranger. I can give him all he lacks, and that so quick it'll make his ugly head swim!"

Terse, but well fitting the case and befitting the man himself.

Verne Velvet instantly removed his foot, stepping back a bit to afford ample room for the renewal of the combat; but Brooks seemed in no particular rush to open the merry dance on his own account.

He scrambled to his feet with an ugly curse and growl, but in place of rushing upon Granger, or even standing ground to meet an advance, he retreated with a vicious snarling in his aching throat.

The Dude in Velvet laughed easily at this exhibition of cowardice on the part of the big rascal, but then turned smilingly toward Dipperling, who was slowly regaining his perpendicular.

There was naught in his actions to indicate a renewal of that combat, but there was an evil devil glittering in his swelling eyes as they flashed from Sport to miner, then back again.

"Next time, my dear fellow, don't overestimate your powers of mastication," advised the Sport, with whimsical gravity. "Of all things, a hog on two legs is about the most objectionable, and what is a fellow past the recognized age of discretion who willfully bites off more than he can properly chew?"

Brooks ground forth a savage curse at this mock lecture, but Dipperling grinned evilly as he gazed into that handsome face for a few seconds before.

"Thanks; heap o' thanks fer it all, stranger," he said with forced calmness. "I'll keep you mighty well in mind fer all o' this, don't you forgit it, now!"

A threat of assassination, is it, my pretty lad?"

"No; but ef you should happen to git croaked afore I find the right way to pay ye off in full—waal, Sport, I'll 'gree to keep your grave green from snow to snow!"

Dipperling turned to slouch off in company with his burly pard, but Verne Velvet cast a brief hint out to bear them on their way.

"Next time you want to begin shooting at the jump-off, Mr. Granger. Those rascals meant to murder you—no less!"

CHAPTER XXV.

AN AMAZING REVELATION.

Fred Granger did not come through that "little scrap" without receiving sundry marks by which to remember the experience for a day or two; but, all things considered, he had cause for feeling thankful that matters were no worse.

Still, the athletic young mine-owner showed no signs of those hurts by halt or limp that same evening as he hastened toward the Piercy residence, evidently on business bent.

For one thing, it was not "lover's night," and for another, the young fellow was hardly arrayed in gala attire, such as an humble suitor instinctively dons when on courtship bent.

Fred was still in his rough, work-day rig as he hurried up to the front door, lifting hand to tap swiftly against a panel.

Far more quickly than the young man expected, a soft voice welcomed him with:

"Oh, Fred, I am so glad!"

One keen glance past Eula, then Granger did something which Kent Kerlin would hardly have approved of, but which certainly did not seriously annoy either of the principals; his arms wound about that yielding form, pressing it fondly to himself, their lips meeting in a warm and rapturous kiss.

All this with an ease and deftness which went far toward proving it by no means an amateurish effort, and certainly lent color to the malicious hint which Alf Dipperling let fall for the benefit of his employer of the night before.

'Twas just as well. If less adroit in making that lovely exchange, both might have been cheated out of that which robbed nobody, left none the poorer, while making at least two loyal hearts much the richer; for, only a few moments after rap and opening of door, the voice of Nathan Piercy made itself heard:

"Who is it, Eula? Am I wanted?"

Very possibly the banker of Frisky Flat would have received a shock had his latest query been given a literal answer, but even young people up to their eyes in love can be diplomatic when the occasion arises, and deftly disengaging herself from those welcome arms, Eula made reply in her sweetest tones:

"A gentleman to see you, papa; Mr. Granger, who is—"

"If I may trouble you, sir," supplemented the young miner, stepping across the threshold, and at the same moment taking chances by giving the little hand of his adored one a warm pressure, which certainly did not tend to banish her charming blushes.

Nathan Piercy was coming into the hallway, face betraying no slight amount of curiosity, and Granger advanced to meet him, speaking quickly:

"Excuse my looks, Mr. Piercy, but I hadn't time to rig up. I thought you ought to know what had happened without delay, and so—"

"No apology is necessary, sir," politely assured the capitalist, although his cool blue eyes had glanced rather critically over the rough-clad caller but an instant before.

Granger flushed at this, but explained why he had come in such guise, more for Eula's sake than that of her father, however.

"There was an accident at my little claim, sir, to one of the fellows working for me, and as he let drop some important facts—"

"Of what nature?"

Granger glanced almost involuntarily toward the maiden, then explained:

"Concerning the hold-up and stage robbery, Mr. Piercy. From what I could gather in his agony after the first benumbing shock began to pass off, Grimes belonged to that lawless outfit—"

"Jed Grimes? One of those road-agents?"

"Yes, sir. And he said—"

"What? Go on, please!"

"Don't you reckon you'd better take it all at first hand, Mr. Piercy?" asked the young man. "From what I caught I honestly believe you would be better satisfied to see and question the fellow yourself. And that's why I have taken this liberty, you understand?"

"There is no—no further danger, sir?" ventured Eula.

"Not in the least, I assure you, Miss Piercy. I only thought—you will come, sir?"

"It is really urgent, then, Granger?"

"In my estimation, it is, indeed! If certain others get to Grimes first, I seriously doubt if you will ever learn the whole truth concerning that hold-up," earnestly vowed the young miner.

"That settles it! I'll be with you in a moment, then," declared the elder gentleman, hurrying away to prepare himself for the trip.

This gave the lovers chance for a few more words together, and Eula convinced herself that no danger could menace her parent through this unexpected call; and then—but Nathan Piercy saw nor heard aught, and surely we have no right to play eye- or eaves-droppers!

All too speedily for either Eula or Frederick Mr. Piercy came to the front, and after a few hurried words to his daughter, the capitalist hastened away under guidance of the one who so fondly hoped to one day have the legal right to call him father-in-law!

With the necessity for all haste so impressed upon his mind, Mr. Piercy found scant chance for questioning by the way, yet he gleaned sufficient facts to make him even more eager to see this crippled miner than was Granger himself.

Not a little to their relief the fellow was found still living, and to all appearances in far better case than Granger had expected him to be again in this world.

"Has any one else been here, John?" Fred asked of the grizzled worker on guard, drawing a relieved breath as the miner shook his head in negation.

"I wouldn't 'a' let 'em in ef they hed, sir," he answered. "Fer Grimes hes bin pritty flighty sence; an' sayin' things which I do reckon mebbe it's best not git out all over in a lump; no, sir!"

With warm thanks Granger temporarily dismissed the guard, then bade the sufferer from that premature explosion make a clean breast of it all, as the surest method of winning repose and freedom from remorse.

"An' to think I'm come 'way down to this!" groaned the battered and burned wretch, shivering with physical torture the while. "An' me—I was to git 'nough pay fer to quit this yer sort o' life an'—oh, cuss them houn's! Cuss 'em from top to toe an' back ag'in!"

"Whom do you mean by that, Grimes?" asked Granger, quickly.

A brief stare out of nearly blinded eyes, then more curses came, now coupled with names which caused the banker to start and gasp in wide-eyed amazement.

"No, no, it isn't—it can't be true!" he huskily gasped, one unsteady hand brushing across his suddenly dampened brows. "They would not—they could not be so—you're lying, man alive!"

Jed Grimes looked dully into that agitated face for a few seconds in wonderment; but then came recognition, and with that a savage thirst for revenge upon those whom he, right or wrong, believed had cheated him after his evil work was done to order.

This thought served to lend the fellow a fictitious strength, and then he poured forth a truly amazing revelation, calling all the powers of heaven and earth to bear witness to his truthfulness.

Shorn of unnecessary verbiage, the plain facts ran in this fashion:

Jed Grimes was one of the lawless aggregation which had held up the stage on its way from Sincerity to Frisky Flat, their main incentive being the large amount of money which, their chief assured them, Nathan Piercy was trying to smuggle into town to brace up the falling fortunes of the bank of which he was the head.

"An' we was all to hev a fair shar' into the plunder, d'ye mind, now!" declared the crippled miner, amid his groans of pain which whisky and thirst for revenge alone served to part-way smother. "We was to git a honest divvy, fer the boss swore he never keered fer that; what he wanted most was to—to croak— you, sir!"

Again Mr. Piercy shook his head, like one half-dazed. Even now he could not credit that awful truth; even now he refused to believe what was slowly but surely changing to conviction in spite of himself.

"On your soul, Jed Grimes, speak nothing more than the naked truth!" solemnly adjured the young owner of the Hope On.

"An' that's jest what I'm a-doin' of, sir, ef I was to go to hell the next minnit for't!" affirmed the sufferer, forcibly.

"I can't—to think that Roger Kerlin would—no, no!"

"He did! I make my dyin' oath on it all, boss!" cried the injured miner with a passionate gesture. "Roger Kerlin was the head devil of us all! Roger Kerlin was chief o' the gang when we jumped from kiver an' held up the hearse like—so help me heaven!"

Nathan Piercy stood like one dazed, but Granger took up the thread, asking sundry questions calculated to clear away all lingering doubts.

Thus the whole diabolical scheme was laid bare, the chief actors denounced by name, and neither father nor son spared by this, one of their purchased tools.

"'Twas all aput-up job, from start to finish," declared Jed Grimes between his gasps of agony. "The ole man was boss, while Kent Kerlin tuck 'nother part, to foolish you an' the gal all the better. An' that hoss come up jest on purpose fer to give him the chaine to make a gran'-stand play—an' then—devil roast them all in a heap!"

When that spasm of agony passed, Grimes cleared up still other misty points, among them to the death of Dan Furlong.

That, also, was through commands issued by their chief, Roger Kerlin! As was the attempt at murder foiled so dashing by the Dude in Velvet.

"Fer that was what he wanted most; to smash you to thunder! An' then he was to—to—water! I'm burning up like—they're feeding the hellfire with a—scoopshovel!"

The wretch went into a convulsion of agony, but Nathan Piercy lent no hand as Granger strove to comfort the wretch; his brain was dazed, his body paralyzed with horror at that amazing revelation.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LADY LEOTA TEMPORIZES.

Roger Kerlin was astir that same evening, although with an incentive which could scarcely compare with the one which animated the owner of the Hope On claim.

So far from being smothered, his jealousy grew with what it fed upon, and the bare fact that Lady Leota had undoubtedly saved the life of that insolent Sport in Velvet, by her lucky snapshot across the faro table, seemed to his suspicious soul but additional proof that a secret understanding of some sort surely existed between the couple.

It might have troubled him to explain just why this thought came, or just why the fancy should cause him such savage uneasiness; the fact remained, and that

was sufficient to set Roger Kerlin in motion.

Lady Leota was at her station when the game opened at her establishment, and for some little time matters progressed as usual; but then came a change for which Kerlin was hardly prepared.

The faro queen called one of her employes to take place at the box, while she gracefully swept away and out of the room, using a private exit, as she always did.

With hardly a thought as to this absence, Kerlin kept his seat, playing listlessly now that his sole incentive was lacking. But as the slow minutes crawled along past the half-hour, he "jumped the game," leaving as soon as his checks could be cashed in.

So far he had seen nothing whatever of the Velvet Dude, and almost in spite of himself Roger Kerlin connected those two facts; had Lady Leota slipped away in order to meet that villain, counting on his remaining at the lay-out awaiting her return?

So it came to pass that the Frisky Flat banker found himself, at a late hour of the night, lurking near the house where the faro queen made her home, keeping watch and ward, with hand on revolver butt, a prey to bitter jealousy.

Not that he had found aught to confirm his worst suspicions. He had seen nothing, heard nothing of Verne Velvet, and even now the most he could say was that yonder shaded windows showed a dim light, which proved that the queen was still out of bed.

But that midnight vigil was fated to meet its reward, and Roger caught breath sharply, as he heard a faint sound, and saw a mellow glow of light spread out in fan-shape from the opening front door.

He was not then where he could catch a fair view of that threshold, but a swift movement carried him to where that view was gained, and then—an execration was smothered on his lips and right hand jerked revolver from belt as he saw—Lady Leota smiling upon the Velvet Dude, as they parted on the threshold!

The deadly weapon flew to a level and forefinger was lifting the pointed hammer for a murderous shot.

If kiss or other caress had been offered or accepted, that weapon would have entered fierce protest, and the death of one or both of those concerned would surely have ensued.

But, no such insult was added to injury. The sport nodded lightly, voice sounding in a brief laugh; then the couple parted, Velvet walking swiftly away, as though in haste to reach his rest, Lady Leota pausing to look after her late visitor for a few moments, then raising one white hand to cover a yawn as she glanced upward toward the twinkling stars.

As a turn in the road carried the Velvet Sport out of sight, Roger Kerlin strode forward, revolver slipping out of sight at the same time.

"Well, Lady Leota!"

The woman started, shrinking visibly as though in fear; or, was it shame? But in an instant rallied, yet speaking in tones of surprise:

"It is you, Mr. Kerlin? I thought—"

"Thought it was another, of course? Well, it's I, right enough," the banker said, pressing forward, as though he would cross that threshold. "I want a word or two with you, my lady, unless—"

He broke off abruptly as Lady Leota barred his way, with shake of head, while a faint smile played about her full, red lips.

"Have you any idea of the hour, my dear sir?" she asked, smoothly, yet with peremptoriness. "You know my rules, and that I dare not break them for—"

Kerlin threw up a hand with impatience at this, then gruffly responded:

"That's played out, my lady! One man has just left, and if the hour wasn't

too late for him, I reckon it's early enough for me. So, shan't I sing my little song out here, where other ears may catch the tune, or will we go inside?"

Never before had this mar dared assume such a demeanor in her company, and that very fact warned Lady Leota that she must yield something, lest far worse should follow.

A barely perceptible hesitation, then the queen of faro drew back and aside, speaking coldly:

"Since you decline to take a kindly hint, Mr. Kerlin, you may enter. If harm comes of it, you can only blame yourself."

"That's all right, my lady, and I'm taking my chances," and, stepping inside the door, he turned to confront the woman as she shut the door behind herself. "And now—what the devil has that fellow been doing in here?"

An insolent address, and couched in terms which no gentleman would dream of employing, even though his rights were far greater than any as yet won by the banker of Frisky Flat.

High color marked those fair cheeks, and blue eyes glowed with an angry light as they encountered that jealous glare.

A few seconds thus, then Kerlin spoke in slightly softened tones:

"Tell me, Leota; tell me that you've nothing in common with that infernal dude! If I really thought so I'd kill him like a dog!"

"First, sir, pray inform me by what right, legal or divine, you presume to question me after this fashion?" demanded the faro queen.

"By the right of love!" passionately cried the banker, voice husky and eyes aflame. "By the right which you gave me when you seemed to listen with favor—"

"Sir!"

"Deny it if you dare! I repeat: by the right of a man who loves you better far than life and all this world contains! By the right you granted when you permitted me to talk of love and marriage, and even let me infer that you would be my wife when—"

"Did I give you my vow to that effect, Mr. Kerlin?"

"No, but you meant—Leota, tell me one thing: has that devil any legal claim upon you? Is he anything to you at all? Am I to see you take up with him as you throw me over?"

"Should I say—yes, Roger?" asked Lady Leota, with a dazzling smile which vastly softened the sting such a question might be supposed to contain.

"If I knew you really meant just that, darling, I'd kill you the next instant—and then die kissing your lips as they began to grow cold!"

In spite of her really wondrous nerve, Lady Leota paled at this fierce response, shrinking away from those burning eyes, yet rallying as quickly, to again force a smile and a low, musical laugh.

"But if I should reply—no?"

"Do you say that, then, Leota? Tell me; and tell me honest! Maybe I'm a fool. Most people would be willing to swear it. But—it's just this way with me, my angel!"

"It can't be half-way business between you and me, Leota. You can't play me fast and loose at your woman's fancy, and still think to wind me around your little finger, in reason and out."

"Am I trying to do that, Roger?"

"That's what I'm trying to make out. And so—what is this infernal dude to you?"

Again that low, sweet laugh, then the faro queen answered:

"Nothing, in the way you mean, Roger. And to prove it: listen! Although I have known Verne Velvet in days gone by, and am free to admit that I both like and respect him, he never was a lover of mine, nor will he ever try to fill that position."

"Honest, darling?"

"Must I speak still plainer, then? Well, you great, jealous bear; if Verne

Velvet was the last man upon earth, I would never marry him!"

Black eyes met blue, holding them firmly, while reading what might lie hidden in their lustrous depths. And Roger Kerlin could not find aught of duplicity therein, greatly to his relief.

He drew a long breath of intense relief, closing eyes and brushing a far from steady hand over his forehead for an instant. He felt curiously weary, just then, but he as quickly braced up, to ask:

"And I, Leota? You will—I have not ruined my chances by acting after this mad fashion to-night, darling?"

A smile, a shake of fair head, then Lady Leota replied:

"Well, hardly as bad as all that would come to, my good friend!"

"No more than friend, Leota? You will marry me, my love? I must have a decisive answer before I leave, or—"

"Not now, Mr. Kerlin. As I told you before, I must have time in which to weigh everything for or against such a complete surrender to any mortal man; and after this—"

"Darling! don't say that; say that you will—"

"I'll give you a positive answer by the end of next week, but for now—go in peace, my friend, before you still further injure my good opinion of yourself," gravely warned the fair queen.

A momentary irresolution, then, with a low, fierce cry of almost ungovernable passion, Kerlin caught Lady Leota in his arms, crushing her to his bosom; but then—a tremendous explosion fairly shook the earth!

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW TO CRACK A SAFE.

As a general rule, Saturday night is "the" night of the week to the large majority of those who form the population of a mining-camp, and the exception was hardly to be looked for in a place like Frisky Flat.

For several reasons which were perfectly satisfactory to himself, Alfred Dipperling had picked out that night of the seven as being best fitted for exemplifying his pet accomplishment of safe-cracking.

Both Brooks and Curly Rebb were on hand, as agreed, the latter looking rather seedy, thanks to his queer experience of the past night.

That was attributed by himself to drinking heavily, and having "sworn off" for the time being, Curly was sober, if still rather shaky in body and nerves.

It was no very difficult task to effect an entrance into the building where the Frisky Flat Bank was located, and as there was no saloon within a reasonable distance on either side, these enterprising gentlemen really had little to fear from uncomfortable curiosity.

In spite of the contretemps of that early forenoon, Alfred Dipperling seemed both cheerful and pleased with himself, possibly because he was returning to his briefly abandoned profession, if only for a night.

"An' right hyar's the dainty stuff which is to do the job fer us, my lads!" was his chuckling address when the trio were fairly installed within the bank, windows doubly guarded by blankets and the usual shades drawn low, making it almost impossible for a gleam of light to show outside.

"What is she, Dip?" asked Curly, curiously.

"Niter-glyssereen, you bet! Made 'er my own self, so I know she's the gine-wine stuff. Eh, Ikey?"

"You bet ye!"

"Made it? How? I thought dynamite was—eh?"

"Which that's what this come from, easy 'nough, pardy. Jest broke up a few sticks o' dinnyemite in a tin pan, kivered it with alcohol, an' let 'er stand ontel the stuff was mixed, alcohol takin' up the glyssereen. I jest poured that off, putt in the same quantity o' water, which made a close combine with the alcohol, lettin' the niter-glyssereen sink

to the bottom. An' right hyar ye hev it, Curly!"

Rebb gingerly touched the stuff on exhibition, but seemed thoroughly puzzled for all.

"But how kin ye use it, man? 'Course I know all 'bout the dry stuff; I kin set off a blast with the next critter; but this—eh?"

"Jest as easy like fallin' off a slick log when ye got a he-ole jag onto ye, Curly! But showin' beats tellin' all holler, an' so—reckon we'd better git down to solid work, pardy?"

"That's what!"

Although the Frisky Flat Bank was pretty well beyond the "safe burglar" belt, and the only possible peril to its valuable contents was understood to be a far from likely raid by armed desperadoes of the James and Younger stamp, nearly all of the traditional precautions had been taken to safeguard the funds placed in trust.

A massive vault had been constructed, inside of which the huge safe itself was placed; one of the ordinary pattern, with square door in front and opened by the workings of a time-lock.

This vault had a massive door of chilled steel, which was warranted as strictly burglar and fire-proof, but at which Alf Dipperling now laughed with chuckling insolence.

"Git the stuff ready, Ikey," he muttered, himself proceeding to fasten a peculiarly shaped wire basket firmly against the door of the vault, between the handle and the combination lock.

Brooks filled this with charcoal, broken into small bits, and then an alcohol lamp, with blow-pipe attachment, was brought into play, quickly turning the charcoal to a glowing mass and forcing all the intense heat against the steel door.

As Dipperling chose to manipulate this arrangement, of course he had no breath to spend in giving explanations, but Curly Rebb could see for himself how marvelously quick the blow-pipe turned a circle cherry-red right back of the wire basket, and then drew a long breath as the whole contrivance was removed and deftly smothered by the burglars.

"Course we could 'a' made a way through thar 'thout takin' all this trouble," declared Dipperling, while waiting for the door to cool off sufficiently for the next step. "But that would 'a' tuck mo time, an' bin heap mo' work into it, while this—jest like chawin' green cheese!"

As all surrounding that heated circle was cool, it did not take long for matters to grow convenient for the next step, and applying their drills, the burglars were not long in justifying the boast made by Dipperling.

If not quite so readily as eating cheese, they rapidly cut a hole through that door, some three inches in diameter. This severed the locking bolt, and when Alfred turned the handle the door swung open without the slightest difficulty.

"Ye see, Curly, the heatin' of it all up right thar, tuck all the temper out o' the steel, an' made it no better stuff then so much b'ller-iron."

"Yas, but—whar's the rocks ye was singin' 'bout?" huskily mumbled Rebb, peering curiously within the vault, this evidently being his first inspection at such close quarters.

"In the safe, yender, whar—"

Rebb gave a little cry of angry disgust as he stepped fairly inside the vault, only to see that huge receptacle closed and seemingly impervious to the arts of all burglarism.

"An' we hain't no funder—burn my blind cats!"

"Button up, cully," surlily growled burly Brooks, who was either an old hand at the business, or else had received full instructions from his more accomplished mate during that interval between theory and practice.

"Jest watch, an' you'll see how a master workman does his job," Alf Dipperling observed, working swiftly all the time.

With putty and glazier's knife he was sealing the crack around the safe door in every place save a couple of inches at top and at bottom, where that almost imperceptible crack was left uncovered.

When this was done, Dipperling shaped a little cup of the putty, so as to include that scant space at the top of the joint, then carefully poured between two and three ounces of the clarified nitro-glycerine into the cup, eagerly watching its action for a full minute.

As he saw the subtle stuff gradually vanishing from his sight, he gave a low chuckle of triumph, drawing back a bit and turning toward the still puzzled Rebb, saying as he did so:

"'Twould take a little mo' time ef the jamb was lined with felt, as they're git-tin' to make 'em now; but it'd come to the same thing in the eend. The niter-glyssereen jest soaks clean through an' all 'round the crack. We putt on a cap like this, tech off the fuse an'—"

"Raise the hull durn town to jump on our backs!" exploded Rebb.

"Don't you begin to think that way, pardy. The door'll blow off, but thar won't be noise 'nough fer a critter to hear it seventy feet off! An' then—waal, we'll jest each grup a mule-load o' rocks an' light out fer greener pastures then any we kin find 'round these diggin's; you jest bet yer sweet life, old boy!"

It seemed delightfully easy when Dipperling spoke in this off-hand manner, and knowing as he did that there could be no occasion for taking such extraordinary risks merely to make a jest of him, Curly Rebb began to enter more wholly into the high spirits of his present mates.

But all was not to go off as smoothly as was predicted, and while Dipperling was applying the cap and fuse, getting ready for the final touch as he saw the nitro-glycerine begin to ooze out at the unputted space at the lower edge of the safe door, a sound caused them one and all to wheel swiftly, there to catch sight of a tall, dark shape which—

"What the devil are you fellows doing in here?" sternly demanded the unexpected intruder, his voice proclaiming him to be Kent Kerlin.

The candle which afforded the burglars light to work by, likewise exposed their faces sufficiently for recognition, and seeing how surely discovery had come through this reckless young man, Dipperling gave a savage oath and cry as he plunged out of the vault, closely followed by his comrades.

Kerlin was flung violently toward the safe, and then, just how was a puzzle: a tremendous explosion followed which fairly shook the earth!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BAGGING THE BANK BURGLARS.

It was quite a little after early cock-crow that this explosion took place, but being Saturday night, the majority of Frisky Flatters were still out of bed or bunk, and knowing that such an explosion was altogether out of the common, instant action was taken.

Loud though that explosion was, indicating no slight damage to life or property, if not to both in one, hardly any two citizens could fully agree as to its precise nature or location.

Among those whom the unusual sound startled into prompt action, was Verne Velvet, only a few minutes earlier gone to his chamber for a bit of sleep to nerve him for the next day's work.

As the Velvet Dude had not yet taken off his clothes, a very few seconds sufficed to carry him down stairs and to the outer door, from whence his keen gaze swept up and down the street, ere long fixing in the quarter where he knew the bank building was located.

Velvet failed to see aught unusual in that direction, yet he felt fairly well assured that the explosion surely came from thence, for good reasons, which he had so far confined to his own sole keeping.

Other guests of the hotel were astir, full of excitement, bubbling over with

wild suggestions and eager queries; and taking cue from what he had gleaned the night before, Verne Velvet called for attention, and then made a brief speech:

"Dollars to cents it's an attempt to rob the bank, gentlemen!" he cried out as soon as he secured attention. "And that big noise will scare the knaves out of town on the keen jump unless—arm yourselves and circle the Flat, gentlemen! Stop each and every one who tries to leave the town, holding them until a satisfactory explanation can be given!"

Fortunately there were a few cool heads within hearing of the Velvet Sport, and quickly catching his idea, they hurried off to put the plan into execution, each man spreading the word as he hurried on through the night.

And so, in a marvelously brief space of time, an armed cordon was closely drawn about Frisky Flat, each and every item of which was upon the keen alert, ready to stop and question his most intimate friend or relative in case any effort was made to run the lines.

Only waiting to make sure his brilliant suggestion was being acted upon, Verne Velvet took other action, picking up a few sturdy men, on whom he felt he might safely rely in a tight pinch.

Among these were Jack Houdin and Mark Visner, the two veterans who acknowledged that their lives had surely been saved by this stranger in velvet when the road-agents doomed them to a rush down the Devil's Dump.

First making sure that his picked squad was armed for stern business in case the necessity for such should arise, Velvet briefly made known his purpose.

"Right or wrong, my friends, I believe I can point out the fellows who kicked up this bobbery, and as they may try to kick at sight of my ugly mug, I'd rather have you along to hide against; you understand?"

"Ef you was skeered to tackle 'em, of course we wouldn't be; oh, no!" said Visner, with fine sarcasm.

"Well, have it any way you prefer, friend," smilingly answered the Velvet Dude, once more getting in motion. "All the same, the fellows may show fight, and I'd rather we were strong enough to take them alive. It may turn out to be a hanging match, you understand?"

"Then you honestly reckon?"

"I believe 'twill prove to be a case of safe-blowing, but from the sound there has been some mistake, or accident which—never mind! We can cipher it all out after we jump our game, gentlemen."

Like one who was perfectly familiar with that particular portion of the Flat, Verne Velvet guided his squad of picked men directly to the rude shanty where Kent Kerlin had paid his visit to the fellows who afterward "double-banked" his rival, Fred Granger.

No light was visible, nor were there any other signs of occupancy, but Velvet preferred to take nothing for granted, in all silence ranging his men so as to fully command that hovel, then speaking in distinct tones:

"Hello, the house!"

No answer was given, and after a brief period of waiting, Verne rapped sharply against the closed door with butt of pistol, repeating his far-west summons:

"Hello, the house, I say!"

A sudden stir within, as though some person or persons had just been roused from honest slumber; then a hoarse voice made itself heard:

"Who's thar?"

"Open up and see for yourself, Ike Brooks!"

"What's wanted, anyway? An' who in blazes be you, that talks so turrible top-lofty?"

"That's all right, Alfred," at once recognizing the speaker from change of voice. "Will you open, or shall my fellows lift the cover clear off of you? Ready, lads! Make kindling-wood of it all unless—"

"Keerful, thar, blame ye!" fairly howled the wiry inmate, as half a dozen strong hands smote those shackling tim-

bers on all sides. "We hain't done nothin' fer to—what's the matter o' you-all, anyway?"

It was a bold bluff, but Verne Velvet knew his game too well to let empty wind carry the day, and for the last time he gave warning:

"Light up in there, and give us a fair glimpse of you. Refuse, or try to make a break of it, and you'll be stopped; by lead if nothing else. Now—light up, or we'll turn that shanty into a hearse!"

Already convinced that escape by flight or by fighting was entirely out of the question, the entrapped burglars sullenly complied with the order issued; striking match and lighting a candle, by the dim glow of which they were fairly covered with revolvers and Winchesters.

There were only two: Dipperling and Brooks; and Verne Velvet frowned blackly as he looked in vain for the third; Curly Rebb was nowhere to be seen.

The two knaves tried bluster and such indignation as honest men would naturally feel at having their peaceful slumbers broken and their humble domicile so rudely invaded; but the Sport in Velvet gave them little time for this, and still less time for arguing the case.

So long as Curly Rebb was out of bonds, he felt that his game was barely half-way won, and knowing how difficult it would be to catch the scoundrel should he once break through those lines and fairly gain the hills, he hurried all he knew how to get upon the scent once more.

Under his directions the two men were tightly bound, then placed under an armed guard, with strict orders to permit no talking, no visitors or outside communication whatever.

Having done this much, Verne Velvet and the two sturdy veterans left that quarter to search elsewhere for the missing third of that triad, a shrewd hint having been let drop by Jack Houdin.

This hint led to a hurried march to another, even less reputable quarter of the Flat, but it did not prove necessary for the shanty to be actually searched.

Those keen brown eyes caught sight of a skulking figure creeping cautiously through the shadows toward that location, and with a wary warning to his men, the sport stole forward to intercept the comer.

His suspicions proved to be well-founded, and recognizing Curly Rebb in this person, the Velvet Dude sprang up in his front, smartly challenging:

"Throw up your hands, Curly! I want you—and I want you badly!"

One less guilty, taken so completely by surprise, would almost certainly have surrendered without attempting fight or parley; but not so this battered and bruised bully.

"Ye houn' o' hell!" he fairly howled as he recognized the Sport in Velvet, making a mad plunge forward as he added: "I'll kill ye like I would a—"

But once again Curly Rebb was counting without his master, for a pair of steel-sinewed arms grasped him, a deft foot tripped him up, and as the two men fell to earth together with Velvet uppermost, the two miners rushed up, eager to lend a helping hand.

Between them the trio found it no difficult task to secure Curly Rebb, and when his arms were bound the ruffian was hurried across to where the other burglars were in waiting.

An excited man whispered a few words to the sport, and as Alf Dipperling fiercely demanded a fair reason for such foul treatment, Velvet replied in stern tones:

"Why have we arrested you, is it? For bank burglary, and—for the murder of Kent Kerlin—no less!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ACCUSED BY A CORPSE.

And such really proved to be the case.

Having pursed the net in which his human game had been caught, the Velvet Sport hastened away to the bank building, there to make an examination for himself.

It was a scene of wreck and ruin, with even worse to be added when note was taken of the blackened and bruised shape which had so recently been full of life and vitality.

As yet no man might say just what manner of connection Kent Kerlin had with the bank burglars, although scarcely one of all the citizens now astir throughout Frisky Flat cast even the shadow of a suspicion toward the dead man.

For the most part it was believed that the criminals had been surprised by the young man while in the act of robbing the bank, and that through his brave efforts to save that precious charge, Kent Kerlin had come by his violent ending.

For reasons which he held to be good and sufficient, Verne Velvet had very little to say, volunteering no information, making no suggestion which could in any manner conflict with the daring scheme which was even then being evolved from his busy brain.

The drilled door of the vault, the wrecked door of the safe itself, spoke too eloquently for mistaking, although the cash contained therein to ail appearance had not been touched by the evil-doers.

In some as yet unknown manner there must have been a premature explosion of dynamite, in which poor Kent Kerlin was caught, to his eternal undoing.

Roger Kerlin was upon the scene when Velvet arrived, seemingly dazed and bewildered, hardly yet able to realize just what a heavy blow had befallen him and his; and after a guarded whisper to Houdin and Visner, the sport took his departure, almost unnoted amid that excitement.

But Velvet was not yet through with his good work of that night.

Using care and keen judgment in each step taken, he gathered together a number of the more influential citizens, making known to them something of what he had discovered since striking the Flat, and then outlining the daring plan through means of which he confidently expected to clear away all doubt and solve all mystery.

At first there was doubt and even objections raised, but one after another the Velvet Dude solved or answered these, until at length his scheme was agreed to by all those in consultation.

"I had intended employing something of the sort on my own hook," Verne declared, when that agreement was reached. "But now I need your help, if only to control Mr. Kerlin."

"It'll come mighty hard on him, don't you reckon?"

"Even so, what manner of mercy did he show those helpless beings whom he doomed to take off the Devil's Dump?" sternly retorted the Velvet Sport, eyes backed as by living fire.

"If all that can be proved—"

"I promise you it shall be proved, from start to finish," coldly declared Velvet, rising to his feet. "And what I ask of you is this: to make certain Roger Kerlin does not cut short my witness, as Dan Furlong was silenced, out yonder in the hills!"

"And that, too, was the work of—impossible!"

"But true, nevertheless. If another hand and eye guided that death-shot, 'twas Roger Kerlin who gave the death-word!"

And so the matter was finally agreed upon, and shortly after the sun came forth in all his splendor, with Frisky Flat all agog over the latest sensation, a strange gathering took place in Lady Leota's place, At Home, where the Sport in Velvet acted as chief of ceremonies.

The windows were closed and the place artificially darkened. The tables were draped, as customary by day, and only a couple of the many oil-lamps were lighted, to imperfectly illuminate the strange scene.

The table over which Lady Leota presided as the goddess of chance was peculiarly arranged, with an eye to the effect which Verne Velvet wished to produce.

A long, irregularly shaped object rested upon this table, masked by a long white sheet; masked, but not mystified; for none who looked that way but instantly recognized the fact: a corpse lay yonder!

All save those taken into Velvet's confidence were led to believe that this meant nothing more than a formal inquiry into the burglary and the manner in which the unfortunate young man came by his death.

Several witnesses were introduced and given a brief examination by Verne Velvet and others chosen to carry out that semblance of routine, but nothing at all sensational was brought to light until Roger Kerlin himself was brought in.

Even then it was more the manner of the witness than his words which caused a sensation; for the father had little light to cast upon the matter, and only grew dramatic when he swore awful vengeance upon the human devils who butchered his noble lad!

Presently the bereaved parent was led away by a couple of strong men.

Then the Velvet Dude lifted hand and begged for perfect silence during the supreme test which was now to come; and, in response to his signal, the trio of road-agents were brought upon the scene, wrists and elbows bound behind their backs.

As the accused were ranged close to that draped table, Verne Velvet drew aside the sheet.

"Behold your evil work!" spoke the accuser, pointing toward that distorted visage. "Confess all, ye sinners, or pay a still heavier penalty! Why did ye add murder to your crime of burglary, I ask ye?"

"We never done nyther one nur the t'other," doggedly vowed Dipperling.

"An' the cove as says t'other way is a liar from headwaters!" just as vigorously asseverated burly Brooks.

Curly Rebb said nothing, but gazed at the face of the corpse as one fascinated—the expression of one who wished to flee, yet who found himself drawn closer by an irresistible power.

"Lying can't save you from paying the full penalty due your crimes, while full confession may possibly lead to a lighter sentence. Why try to brazen it out as though—"

"D'you want us to lie 'bout it?" demanded Dipperling. "Shell we say we done it when we never didn't?"

"You were heard to plan this burglary. You were heard to name the hour, the night, the route you meant to take when fleeing with your ill-gotten plunder—"

"That's a lie! But ef 'twasn't all a lie, how much better is he who 'mits he knowed it all, yit 'lowed the trick to run on—like this?"

It was a keen hit which the foxy member made, but Verne Velvet passed it by as unimportant, striving all he knew to weaken the nerves of the prisoners, yet totally failing, so far as Dipperling and Brooks were concerned. There was a bright glow of triumph, however, in his brown eyes as he motioned for those two captives to be removed, one strong hand closing on shoulder as he kept Curly Rebb in the room.

Rebb was all a-shiver with superstitious dread, and he gave a moan of apprehension as the Velvet Sport spoke.

"Only the truth can save your neck from the hangman's rope, Curly Rebb! A single lie added to all which have gone before, will surely damn you past all redemption! Who killed Kent Kerlin?"

The prisoner shivered like a leaf, but maintained silence.

"Ye purblind fool!" sternly warned the examiner-in-chief, lifting a hand to emphasize his words. "Must I call upon the spirits of an unknown world to aid me in bringing the whole truth to light? Must I summon the dead from their unhallowed graves—must I call upon Daniel Furlong to—"

"I am here: what want ye of Dan Furlong, pardner?"

Coming apparently from the ceiling above, these slowly spoken words caused more than Curly Rebb to look hastily in that direction, some to shrink away with sudden fear, others to take grim note as the prisoner seemed about to collapse.

"Listen, Curly Rebb!" added the Velvet Sport, in his natural tones. "You knew 'his witness before he came by his death in such strange fashion, when—"

"Curly knows how! Curly, why did ye plug a pardy, that-a-way?"

"I never—I didn't—oh, let me git out!" moaned the superstitious wretch, struggling feebly to beat a retreat.

But Verne Velvet held his grip, again forcing the miserable creature to turn squarely toward the dead man, to add:

"Time enough for settling who shot Dan Furlong after we determine through whose agency Kent Kerlin came by his death. Now, who did this awful deed, Curly Rebb?"

A brief pause, during which the prisoner gazed upon that marred visage with fear-distended eyes; and, as he gazed, an awfully strange thing happened!

That corpse slowly raised head and trunk from the faro-table where it had been stretched out, and, as the accused tried to shrink further away in his horror, that stiff, right arm likewise lifted to point directly at the prisoner, while sepulchral words seemed to issue from those bruised and blackened lips!

"Thou art the man, Curly Rebb! You killed me: I swear it, coming back from the unknown world to make known the whole truth!"

With an unearthly howl, Curly Rebb fell to the floor in another fit, while Jack Houdin, grinning broadly at the success of that ruse, crept out from under the faro table, where he had moved the body to suit the words spoken by Verne Velvet.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE VENTRILOQUIST SPORT RETIRES.

With the spirit of Curly Rebb so completely broken, it was no difficult matter to secure a complete confession, whereby all remaining doubts were cleared away.

Curly told the story of that daring hold-up, confirming all which the Velvet Sport had surmised, and making clear to its full extent the devilish duplicity of the Kerlias, father and son!

They were both engaged in playing a daring game for high stakes.

Roger meant to remove his partner in the mining and banking business, then manipulate affairs so that the greater portion of Nathan Piercy's wealth would come into his own coffers.

As for Kent, there was one redeeming quality in his case; his love for the maiden whose fancy he strove to capture by deeds of a mock heroic nature was thoroughly genuine; he loved Eula with all the fiery ardor of his untamed nature.

When Curly Rebb reached the end of his confession, there was but one point left in doubt; just how that explosion in the bank occurred, which ended in the death of Kent Kerlin.

Doubtless the nitro-glycerine manufactured by Alf Dipperling formed an important quantity in that problem, but, just how the stuff was exploded at that critical moment, no man living might say with certainty.

Roger Kerlin was taken prisoner before he had even an inkling of the startling truth. That done, he who had figured so extensively of recent days in the affairs of Frisky Flat as the Sport in Velvet, removed the mask so perfectly worn, revealing himself in his true colors.

This explanation was given before a select committee of citizens, with Roger Kerlin in attendance to speak for himself, in case he wished to do so.

The story would consume far too much space were I to give it as Verne Velvet did; a synopsis must here suffice.

Years before Frisky Flat made the acquaintance of Roger Kerlin, he had borne another name in a far-distant city near the Atlantic, and while there had com-

mitted a foul murder, the victim of which was father to him who now figured as Verne Velvet.

"There were only two of us left, then—a boy and a girl; but we were old enough to feel the awful blow as few children can, and we swore to never give over until the foul murder of our loved one was fully avenged!"

"That happened years ago—years which have been devoted to working out a mystery which long since baffled keen detectives, whom a large reward set on the scent; but, never once in all that time have we faltered, or for an instant abandoned our set purpose. And now, in Roger Kerlin we have found Lloyd Quimple, and Lloyd Quimple foully assassinated our father, Ivory Inman!"

"A lie! All a lie, black and false as hades itself! fiercely cried the accused.

"The truth; God's own truth, Lloyd Quimple!"

"You? I thought—my love!" huskily gasped the bewildered criminal, whose sins were surely finding him out, after so many long years.

"Your bitterest enemy on all this wide world, Lloyd Quimple!" the woman spoke, chillingly. "The daughter of the honest nobleman whom you so foully assassinated, giving him no chance for life—the girl who, when scarcely more than an infant, swore above the grave of that murdered father to never cease searching until his slayer was run down and fairly brought to justice!"

"You—Leota—my loved one whom I was to—oh, wake me up!" his hoarse and strained voice rising to a half-crazed screech as he staggered to his feet, reeling blindly the while. "I'm going mad! I see a devil taking the form of my angel! I can't think—I'm—gods! Am I going mad?"

The Sport in Velvet sprang to the side of his entrapped game, gripping an arm tightly, as he cried out, in fiercely exultant tones:

"No, but you are going to the gallows, you murderer!"

The avengers, brother and sister, meant just what those fierce words portended, too, declaring that, now the work self-imposed was perfected, they would shake the dust of Frisky Flat from their feet forever, taking the assassin of their father back to pay the penalty due his crime.

But it was not to be.

That same day a resolute mob uprose to lynch the trio of burglars, swinging off Curly Rebb, Alf Dipperling, and Ike Brooks.

Appetite whetted by this grim duty, word was passed to make a clean job of it by sending Roger Kerlin up the same tree; but, that proved to be beyond their power.

Suspecting some such move, the Velvet Dude gathered a choice squad of trusty men, holding the mob at bay until their passions gave way to sober reason; but the life that was denied the rope, was given to poison.

Realizing at last how thoroughly he had been befooled by "Lady Leota," Roger Kerlin swallowed a powerful potion which he had for years carried upon his person, and was already growing cold in death when his desperate action was discovered.

That same night Verne Velvet and Lady Leota vanished from Frisky Flat, never again to return.

After a reasonable length of time (having proven past all doubt that his "Hope On" Mine was a young bonanza) Fred Granger made Eula Piercy his wife, and not one of the trio more particularly concerned have as yet seen cause for regretting that action.

Tommy Triplock procured a new span of lead mules, and on each trip found particular pleasure in calling their attention to a number of graves on the hillside—those of a portion of the evil gang which brought death to his original pets, up there near the crest of the famous "Devil's Dump."

THE END.

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